

...The tiny spaceship screeched **THROUGH** space at unheard of speeds. 'THROUGH space' to be distinguished from 'through space.' Everything is always traveling through space from point A to B, traveling past infinite points in between. When we say 'THROUGH space' we really mean **THROUGH** it—Trans-Hyperbolic-Rerouted-Omni-Utter-Graviton-Hopping. Other ways to say it are 'between space,' 'around space,' 'folding space,' 'instantaneous travel,' or 'teleportation' — in other words traveling from A to B without touching any C's along the way. People of lower IQ call this 'hyperspace travel,' but we know better than to copy such a cheap phrase used in paperback sci-fi novels. Right? Right! So **THROUGH** space it is.

Or was. As the ship switched off its gravity wave resonators it stopped traveling **THROUGH** space and appeared eighty-five million kilometers above the plane of a yellow sun solar system, traveling just below the speed of light. Full light speed travel is, of course, impossible—any dunce knows that—but at speeds approaching that of light, time almost stops for the traveler (relative to the surrounding universe). This makes it possible to catch onto a gravity wave and travel **THROUGH** space, sort of like surfing. The ship slowed and its clock devices read that it was approaching real-time, relative to the solar system. Spectral measurements (IR, UV-vis, X-ray, etc.) of this solar system's single yellow sun indicated that it would be ideal for the purpose to which the tiny automated ship was set. The ship neared the third planet and could see through its telescope eyes that this world's environment would be perfect, with certain parts having just the right rainfall and atmosphere. The hatches on the ship opened and out poured several hundred spheroid objects about the size of your fist, scattering all over the landmass of the planet. Mission accomplished.

The ship sped onwards, collecting all matter it touched through the black cone on its front, converting the matter to energy with perfect efficiency, traveling ever faster as the process continued. As it neared the speed of light it prepared to catch onto a gravity wave and travel **THROUGH** space—and then it was destroyed. (Wipe out!) To be more exact, it ceased to exist in any form, energy or matter. Exactly what destroyed the ship is beyond the thought capacity of any intelligent being limited by our four dimensional space-time universe.

This is not our concern. The only things we need now concern ourselves with are the pods dropped by the ship. They plunged through the outer atmosphere, their porous ceramic yttrium oxide shells glowing red, leaving short-lived bright streaks in the night sky, seen by roughly thirty-five billion pairs of reptilian eyes and only a few hundred million mammalian and avian pairs. As each pod was slowed by the lower atmosphere it reached terminal velocity and a small spring device popped off the yttrium oxide shells. (Sixty-seven million years later one was found by a primitive hunter, ground up, and made into a white war paint.) The pods sent out their parachutes behind them, slowing considerably. At an altitude of about two hundred fifty meters the parachutes detached and the metal orbs plummeted to Earth, landing with a dull thud. One of them struck a spinosaurus on the head, interrupting its tasty meal of leg of iguanodon. Lastly the pods each shot out several small glossy red berry projectiles.

Over the millions of years thereafter the metal pods rusted and disintegrated. However, the glossy red berries that were shot out contained DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid), that wonderful stuff that allows life to regenerate... Or is it wonderful?

The genus *Coffea* from the plant family *Rubiaceae* is quite remarkable. It is not remarkable because it contains DNA; all plants do. It is so because it is one of the few plants that produce caffeine in large amounts. And it was the first caffeine producing plant on Earth. The *robusta* species of coffee has four point five percent caffeine and is second only to *ilex* (a.k.a. yoppa), with leaves having seven point four percent. So a few plants have higher caffeine content. However, as all people of sophistication know, coffee has the advantage of having the best flavor

for the amount of caffeine obtained. In large doses caffeine is quite toxic, especially to certain very large herbivorous reptiles – the coffee tree had nearly caused their extinction and would have if not for an asteroid colliding with earth. But in moderate doses caffeine produces extreme states of simultaneous euphoria and mental alertness as well as increased energy and stamina. It not only enhances the higher brain functions but the animal instincts and metabolism as well. When one has had several cups of coffee the olfactory senses are roughly one-and-a-half times as perceptive and sexual drive is often increased threefold. The coffee tree (or plant, depending on to whom you talk) had dire consequences for Earth, as it does everywhere it grows.

And grow it did. On the down side, its maturation requires about four years and reproduction (flowering and making fruit and beans) doesn't occur until then. However, the species *Coffea arabica* is autogamous (self-pollinating) and, although most of the plants died, a few lived and were soon on their way to glory. For brief times it flourished and covered zero point zero two percent of the landmass on the globe. At others it was driven to near-extinction by drought, flood, ice age, volcano, meteor explosions blocking out the sun, etc. Being extremely sensitive to frost and heat it even died out in the Americas and was only recently transplanted there by humans. But it bounced back and survived in Africa, unchanged for the most part over the tens of millions of years, right up to today.

Once a small, brave monkey climbed down from the higher branches of a tall tree to the lower ones where he could reach out and pick the glossy red berries of a nearby young coffee tree. The smaller male monkeys were the experimenters and would occasionally eat a type of plant that was untried. Very dangerous activity, indeed, but it served a purpose in the survival of the monkeys—new food discoveries were highly welcome. After eating a small portion of several berries, it found the pulp to be quite sweet, but there was too much seed and not enough fruit. It spit out the slightly bitter seeds, deciding the red berries simply would not do as food. About five minutes later the monkey was swinging about, yelling like mad, and extremely irritating the others of its tribe. Our brave experimenter, not used to the diuretic effects of caffeine, found that he had to urinate quite badly—and did so—onto the dominant male's head. The food tester was then chased to the ground below, a stream of urine flying from him as he went. The monkeys rarely, if ever, touched the ground, but there the two monkeys stood. The dominant male was greatly disturbed by the fact that the little monkey now turned and faced him. Disturbed but not exactly frightened. The larger monkey charged. As it did so the smaller male picked up a jagged rock about half the size of its head and smashed it into the large male's face, killing it instantly. The rock the monkey used had the great honor of being the first tool used by primates on planet Earth and, even today, its name is spoken with great reverence among tools of the world as 'Rock, the Great Grandfather Tool.'

The little fellow climbed back up into the trees, proceeding to mate with as many females as it possibly could. The noise was heard for miles throughout the jungle. Tools, as such, were not used again for fifty thousand years, and those were only twigs used to pull ants out of anthills for a high-protein snack. Coffee berries were seldom eaten again by the monkeys and not for another two million nine hundred ninety-three thousand five hundred years did the monkey's offspring eat the berries on a regular basis. And the roasted seeds were not used to make a drink until five thousand years after that. The answer to exactly why the ship dropped the seeds died with the ship and its builders, some two billion five hundred million light-years away. This is not about them. It is about you.

Outcast never conforming, forming  
habits in the gutters of the soul-  
scorching revelation of your deepest fears,  
hears, feels, only the pain  
and none of the joy  
ends where life does.

Amidst all your science,  
technology, wealth, and splendor,  
did you ever imagine it  
would give birth  
to that such as

I  
?

"Coffee, far sweeter than a thousand kisses." Or so says J. S. Bach in his opera *Kaffee Kantate*. Perhaps he was just being sarcastic about the prohibition of coffee for women in Germany during his time. And perhaps it all just depends who the hell you're kissing. Though most of the time you think of Johann Sebastian was probably right; coffee has always been your one true love. Whether it was the bitter, unsweetened, awful 'cowboy coffee' your dad gave you when you were a young boy visiting his horse ranch or the flavored gourmet coffee your grandmother would let you have when your mother wasn't watching, coffee has always been your one true desire, the only thing that ever gave your life any real meaning whatsoever.

There are eight different roasts of coffee, going from light to dark: cinnamon (color, not flavor), American, city, full city, Viennese, French, Italian, and espresso. Of course there are no well-defined lines. The lighter roasts are smooth with hints of grain, yet somewhat acidic (which gives coffee its flavor) while the darker ones are somewhat crisp and bittersweet. It would take more space than we have available to list all the different types of coffee. Let's see, there's Kona, Kenyan AA, Jamaican Blue Mountain, Sumatran, Colombian, and, of course, the ever-famous Costa Rica La Minita, etc., etc. The list could go on forever almost, and if we got into all the different blends on the market, then it would. The most common ways to brew coffee are slow drip, percolator (yuck!), French press (anything French is exotic), auto-drip, and espresso. According to the brewing method, one should grind the beans anywhere from coarse to fine, in the order the methods are previously listed. In addition there are innumerable flavored coffees and additives that one can experiment with: cinnamon (flavor, not color), chocolate, Irish cream, mint, amaretto, etc., etc., sugar, honey, diet sweetener, etc., etc., cream, milk, condensed milk, steamed milk (for cappuccino and latté), whipped cream, artificial creamer, soy milk... and the list continues.

How can the taste of coffee be described? How can any taste be described? What does chocolate taste like? Chocolate tastes like chocolate. Strawberries taste like strawberries. Dog shit tastes like dog shit. Cyanide tastes like almonds, though you only get to find out once. And coffee tastes like coffee. And that's that. Or is it?... No, not good enough. Coffee: primitive and tropical with an undeniable sophistication, bitter and sweet at the same time with an aroma of chestnuts roasting on an open fire. (Not that you've ever smelled chestnuts roasting on an open fire... or have you? Well, anyway, it sounds good.) The blood of the gods, the nectar of life, liquid inspiration, Satan's perspiration. This is getting silly and sounding way too much like a cheesy coffee commercial. Good to the last drop. Celebrate the moments of your death... er... we mean life. But life is death. Death is life. Without one you cannot have the other. You've always known that, but you don't know how you've known it. Anyway, best not waste our breath on telling some idiot what coffee tastes like, he or she will just have to go out, get some good coffee, and learn how to prepare it properly. One can, of course, buy one's own coffee already made, but be forewarned: Many of the so-called 'gourmet' coffeehouses do not always serve good coffee.

For you, however, the love of coffee goes far beyond simply drinking it; any fool can acquire a taste for and knowledge of good coffee. It takes a madman, genius, or both to go to the extent that you have for coffee. Not only do you experiment with the dozens of roasting and brewing methods, but also the planting, growing, and breeding of different species of coffee. North America isn't exactly the ideal place for growing coffee, to say the least, but as long as the crop is small, modern technology can easily circumvent these problems.



Technology, that is to say a greenhouse, and a bit of sneaky underhandedness. Blackmail has always been a risky business, but, as long as your demands aren't too outrageous, you're usually safe. No, the president of the university wasn't happy at all when you showed him the videotapes of the graduate students illegally dumping old toxic waste from the chemistry department. Not a very ethical thing for the university to do, no siree, Bob. But the waste had to be disposed of due to the fact that the university was soon to have a thorough inspection by the EPA, which had been alerted to the illegal waste storing practices, especially by the chemistry and chemical engineering departments. If the university bigwigs weren't careful, the school could wind up getting fined up to eight hundred grand.

There were thousands of bottles and cans of waste, most of it unlabelled and entirely unknown (the most dangerous type), some of it dating back to the forties, with rusty lids and leaky containers oozing slime that eats holes in tile floor. It was all hauled away and dumped. A pity, too; besides the one hundred fifty grams of a mixture containing dioxin (really nasty stuff), there was also a birth control without side effects, a cure for cancer, an efficient non-polluting fuel, the elixir of life (but who needs that when you've got coffee?), and a revolutionary underarm deodorant that only needs to be used once a month. All this was dumped into a large hole right next to a small river that leads into the Mississippi.

As an undergraduate working in the chemistry department's stockroom (where the waste was stored in the back), you were privy to all sorts of information—such as when and where the dumping was to take place. The few people who worked there acted as if it was no big deal, but you knew that type of activity was highly illegal—and took advantage of your position when the opportunity arose. Not that you gave a dead rat's ass where this shit was going to be dumped, as long as it wasn't near you.

You lucked across the entire dumping operation early one evening while staying late at work. The stockroom was locked up and your boss, Jim, had let you stay behind to study—it was a nice quiet place for it. At about seven o'clock you heard a set of keys rattle outside the door and ducked down behind your desk. Although Jim allowed you to stay late, you weren't supposed to be there, only being an undergraduate and all. Jim never was one for following rules anyway. In the stockroom he kept a secret cabinet where he hid his thirty-year-old Scotch, fine French wine, and cocaine that he'd use to entice girls into dropping their drawers—a different girl every week. With a black convertible Porsche, a muscular build, and a hundred-dollar haircut it's amazing he didn't have a different girl every day. Is he using them or is it the other way around? Well, the only reason he held onto his shitty job after his grandparents left him two million bucks is for the proximity to the college girls.

Anyway, just who do you suppose it was coming in this late? None other than the chair of the chemistry department himself, Dr. Wetgrave with two of his graduate student assistants, Xiaopeng Zhen and Hattarattaguptashrivopan Pramodrajeshgang. He told them exactly what he wanted done with all the chemical waste stored there. Pardon the cliché, but to make a long story short let's just say you taped the entire conversation on your mini tape-recorder that you use so you can sleep during class lectures. God, it was too good to be real. Those idiots even talked about exactly where the dumpsite would be so you could drive out there and videotape the whole dumping process for the university president to see. What a beautiful day that was. So let's go there.

It's only you and the fat president watching the videotape. Well, he's watching the tape; you're too busy looking around his fancy office, admiring all the expensive artwork,

pottery, and carvings, each one probably costing not less than five thousand dollars. In the center of a glass cabinet filled with Japanese porcelain teacups stands a small sculpture of two samurai warriors locked in a death duel. It looks to be as old as time itself, though it's in perfect condition and could be brand new. The artisan surely knew his craft—the sword looks to be real steel and the robes authentic silk. The WWII medals next to the cabinet indicate that the collection is an American soldier's spoils of war, probably belonged to the fat president's dad.

When he realizes what's on the tape his face turns red, beads of sweat roll off his bald head, bounce off an eyebrow, careen down the side of his nose, off his lip, hang from the lower of his two chins for a precarious few seconds, and plummet down onto his belly behind the big oak desk; a big pinball machine with sweat beads for balls. He takes a handkerchief from his pocket and wipes his face. Game over.

"Okay, okay, just turn off the tape and tell me what it is you want," the illustrious president says. He is obviously used to this sort of treatment and also probably prepared to hand over a big sack of money that he keeps in his desk for just such occasions.

"Oh, not much, really," you tell him, "just all the junk cleared out of the chemistry building attic so I can start a research greenhouse for coffee."

The sweat now flies from the fat guy's face as spasms of uncontrollable laughter rake his gelatinous body. He is even heard outside the building by a pervert in the process of masturbating under his trench coat while watching the young college girls walk by. The pervert, believing he's been found out and that this laughter is aimed at him, is deeply humiliated, and goes away to eventually become the founder of a new-age religious cult that's based on the belief that human beings are descended from extraterrestrials.

"That's it?!?" the president roars in disbelief, making his chins jiggle around.

You think of maybe demanding the Japanese figurine sculpture... but no, that would be too tasteless a deed for even you.

"That," you smile hideously, "and a three-page typed report on whatever episode of *Beavis and Butthead* plays tonight."

"What?" the fat man's jaw drops to his lap, which sounds rather impressive, but his flabby chin almost touches his lap anyway. "Are you crazy?!"

"Yes. Can you meet these two demands?" you ask.

Long pause.

"Yes. I'll have the report for you tomorrow and the chemistry attic cleared out as soon as possible," the president concedes.

"Good," you grin like the Cheshire cat, stand up, reach into a fancy crystal candy bowl on his desk, and grab a handful of wrapped candy, "I can't wait to get started." You take the videotape from the machine, explaining that there are several more copies in the hands of two lawyers who will make these copies public if any unnatural 'accident' happens to you. The president suddenly becomes tense as he realizes you just might be crazy but are no idiot. He starts sweating and the pinball machine gives you a free game, but then he wipes away the liquid-instead-of-metal balls. On your way out you bow like a performer, look him square in the eyes, and simply say "Tilt," then quietly shut the door behind you.

Walking down the long hallway with your footsteps echoing on the marble floor, you unwrap a piece of the candy, exit through the pair of large beautiful redwood doors and toss the wrapper over your shoulder. As you pop the brown candy in your greedy smiling mouth, the flavor hits you and the irony is too much to bear; you bust out laughing... Coffee!

## m 2 E

Big Phone ring, listening, not answering.  
Politic Dissension, lunatic prevention, doctors recommend.  
Borders invaded, raided, faded into nothing.

Must defend!

Cleansing fire, said the liar: the world will mend.  
Preaching revelation, against masturbation, we're the only  
nation....

in god's eye.

Hand quake, finger shake, above red button shining.  
Shafts fly to the sky; won't get to cry or get high before we  
die.

Won't get paid or laid before we're made.....

nothing.

ICBM, Tomahawk, B-1: Lots of fun, son.

No one lost or won this one.

The high cost of unleashing the power of the sun.

Digitize, vaporize, atomize.....

Earth's crust.

Blood lust must become just rust and dust.

m to E 10% efficient conversion, perversion.....

of science.

Cruise missile sly, radar eye, common household appliance.

Sky black, no going back.

Mountains leveled, disheveled, climbing into orbit, never  
climbed again.

Is there a hell for this sin?!!!

Hydrogen fusion, madman's delusion of immortality.

Cosmic brutality, totality, reality.

Eternity passes our fried asses.

Blackened cinders, melted blenders and car fenders.

Dust settle, glistening globs of metal,

no flower petal or stinging nettle....

Grows.

200 Kelvin at night, 500 at day, no wind blows,

No water flows, no one sees or knows

The flattened, blackened, blistering, freezing purity of the  
wasteland of sand and....

no atmosphere here on Earth's sphere.

Unseen:

All this order that comes out of the Chaos.

Or is it the other way around?

and when did we forget how to tell the difference?



Nuclear masturbation glow-in-the-dark penis throb. Pump hump jump the world's bones spewing a toxic wasteland of radioactive sperm. Fertile mutant cities, girls with 3 titties. What the fuck am I on about now? 3 mile high, 3 Mile Island, 3 mile cloud pillar like staring up at a girl's legs with neon panty hose that glows brighter than Rudolf/pH's nose. "Rudolf?" Is that with an f or a pH of 2 or 3 acid rain pain main frame of mind fart. Access code entered, password accepted via short wave radio. Standing by for launch initiation.

5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 0.

All silo's emptied.

Was it good for you 2.718281828459.....

**Erecrececece!!!!!!!X**

Nuclear disaster master baiter,  
hater of all things with wings  
like birds and turds,  
"Hey! Shit don't fly!"  
It does when it hits the fan, man.  
So don't reach for the button  
or I'll be cuttin' off your finger,  
I'd like to linger... a little longer.

### Soldier

Corpses and bodies surround me as I march onward through the valley with them. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of Death, I shall fear no Evil, for I am Evil and I am Death... as are all the soldiers who march with me. We are all dead and we know it. The radioactive fallout is on all sides. Protected between the mountains we will live longer than the lucky fools near the cities; maybe a week, maybe two. We will bleed from gums, eyes, fingernails, and genitals. With the new medicines they give us, we might even hover in that state for as long as a month to do their bidding. And then we will die. Slowly. Painfully.

Yet still we march onward to kill the enemies, whoever they might be. Like wind-up toys we plod onward; it is all we know, all we are. The monkey-rifle on my back calls out to me, repeating over and over, "Take me up, cut through the lines of suffering men, spare them the agony and misery that lies ahead." And I cannot; it is not in my training, my programming. Who would have thought that a machined piece of steel could be more human than a man?



You and your girlfriend, Amy Night, sit in a quiet booth in the coffeehouse. Annoying rock music crackles over tiny speakers and you're gulping down a 'cafe caramel,' a sweet latte with caramel flavor added. Amy is picking away at an overpriced hamburger and drinking down Cokes like her life depends on it, all at your expense, of course. Between chewing the burger, gulping Coke, and smoking GPC's (Gray Pulmonary Cancers), she makes a sarcastic remark about the weird art display hung on the walls. It looks something like a cross between coat hanger wires, stick figures, and a childhood nightmare suddenly remembered via some bad acid.

Coincidentally the 'artist' walks through the door not five seconds later with a friend, bragging about her artwork and never once shutting up about it.

As they come by your table you ask her what medium she uses.

"Coat hanger wires. They're made into stick figures of a childhood nightmare that recurred to me when I took some bad acid."

You give her your most sarcastic look and say, "You should take some more." Amy playfully kicks you under the table. You love it when she does that; it makes her breasts jiggle... and doesn't hurt terribly much.

"Oh, thank you," the artist says, "would you be interested in purchasing any of my work?"

You explain to her your financial situation, which is that of most students.

"I see," the so-called 'artist' says, "Well, I must get back to my patron," and turns away.

You and Amy simultaneously lean over the table and whisper to each other, "*Patron?*" He looks as though he can hardly afford a coffee, let alone her overpriced trashcan art. You then say, "Must be blind," somewhat louder. The 'artist' glares confrontationally, but moves on.

Once again Amy starts going off about marriage, kids, and a quiet life together. You're trying your hardest not to reach over the table and strangle her with your bare hands. Perhaps, you think, maybe gloves would be better... Worked for O.J.

"Look, I want to, I really do, ok? But not while I'm in school. I've told you that before. And I just wouldn't feel right about it. I don't have the time or the money. I've got to get my life halfway stable before making some big jump like that," you explain.

She damn near starts crying. "But things are stable enough, we don't need much money, we love each other, and we're practically living together already, and things are great. Imagine all the money we'd save." She knows where your heart really lies.

"Nuh uh, no way! Not while I'm in school. Besides worrying about money, I like living alone and I don't need the extra stress, especially with you wanting kids and all. Think with your head for a second. Can't you wait a few years? We've only been together six months. And marriage don't mean shit compared to love, now does it?" You know a little scolding will shut her up. And the fact people are staring. Must keep up a good public appearance.

"Well, alright... But you are coming to my dance recital?" she half asks, half tells you.

You think you'd rather get married than see her stupid modern dancing again. "I told you last week I was going to the Pi's rush (fraternity recruiting) party tonight, and I've seen your cute little butt dance a thousand times," you give her a devilish grin. "Don't worry—I'll give you somethin' to dance about tonight."

"But you won't get home 'til three o'clock in the morning," she whines.

"I'll try and get home early this time," you lie. Then you jokingly ask her, "Why is coffee better than women?"

"...I give up, why?"

"Coffee doesn't mind if you wake up at three a.m. and decide to have a cup."

She playfully kicks you under the table, a little harder this time, a little more boob jiggle to

go with it. You stand up, lean over the table, and give her a kiss that might be more suited to the bedroom. Your tongue probes every bit of her mouth and you can feel her anxiety melt away like chocolate candy in your hand, no matter what those damn commercials say. You move over to her side of the table and crush her body next to yours for a final kiss before you leave, oblivious to what the people watching you are thinking. You move away, gently brushing your hand against the side of her breast and she gives a little squirm of pleasure. The both of you grasp hands and you give her a final peck, telling her "I have to go, I'll see you tonight," and also "I love you," not meaning it.

She says, "Love you too. See you tonight."

Before you hop on your mountain bike you pop a piece of gum in your mouth to get rid of that burnt dog pie cigarette taste from French kissing Amy. Not that you like chewing gum, of course, but almost anything tastes better than GPC saliva—one reason why you won't make a serious commitment with her. She's fun, in a way, and God knows you love her long blonde hair and cute little ass, but she can't satisfy you completely and—Christ!—is she dumb. One would have to be to smoke cigarettes. Maybe, you think, you'll get a piece of something else tonight.

You stop off at Stevie's on your way home to pick up a quarter oz. of kind bud, some of the best hydro around. As usual, there's a house full of hippies and dogs. And fleas, and lice, and roaches. And lions, and tigers, and queers, oh my! Shit, it's sick hugging all those smelly bastards as they greet you with "Jah Love," "Hello, Brother," etc., etc. One girl hugs you and she's got hair so bushy you have to close your eyes so they don't get poked out. She smells as bad as the rest, but you give her an extra big hug—she's got extra big tits.

Steps and Two Moons come in the front door with a huge box of garbage—old food dug out of dumpsters behind grocery stores. You do your best to keep from laughing as you watch Steps, with his black felt hat and filthy jeans with flowers and peace slogans all over them in permanent magic marker, handing out all this old food to the people standing around. And, get this; they treat it like gold. There's more food than they can all possibly eat in several days—if they don't die from food poisoning first. This gets your curiosity up.

"How long have you been getting food like that?" you ask.

"'Bout six years. Want any of this spaghetti?" Steps offers.

You stare at the paper grocery sack containing about twenty unopened box packages of dry spaghetti. "Nah, I already got some spaghetti at home," you lie. It looks okay, and dry pasta doesn't spoil for years, but why chance it? The grocery store must have had a good reason for trashing it. Right? Sure! Then you add, "But I wouldn't mind givin' this herb a little test run," you say with an eager smile, holding up the quarter oz. bag of pot you just purchased.

Suddenly all attention is drawn away from the food as everyone anxiously watches Stevie clean a small bud and load his glass pipe. You get first hit, of course.

"Thwwpp.....! **Cough! Cough!**... Whooohhh..... **Cough** good... shit!" And damn well it better be, for seventy-five dollars a quarter ounce, you think and pass it on quickly (you hate smoking—eating it's much better... and lasts a lot longer... and it's better for you, too).

Stevie starts to play his guitar, Butterfly joins in with a light tambourine beat, and Steps plays a drum. It's actually not half bad, even if somewhat monotonous. At least hippies are good for something besides a source of weed and a mild laugh.

After two songs you get restless and say you have to leave so you can get to a party on time. More hugs, except that girl with the big tits doesn't join in—yeah, she knows what's up in your head. Hippies, not exactly intelligent, very lethargic, not much ambition, but they're sure not stupid about the ways of the world and human nature—not like the Greek (frat and sorority) kids, who's party you're going to tonight.

When you go out the door you see ol' Crazy Snake half-crashed-out on the front porch. That crazy old fossil looks to be about ninety years old. The old hillbilly-turned-hippie gets stoned at least five times a day. And God knows what other drugs he takes. He does nothing but sit around on his lazy ass all day, bamming whatever narcotics he can off the kids who come to see him like he's some kind of great prophet or guru. You look down on his frail, withered body and wonder how someone so decrepit remains alive. He wakes up and says "Hey man, what's happenin'?"

You say "Not a whole lot. How's life?"

"Just beautiful, man, as always." (How could life be anything but beautiful when you're constantly drugged up?) "You know, in the next few days someone's gonna ask you if you've seen me around." He always comes up with these stupid predictions and when one just happens to be right he makes a big deal out of it. You'd like to see him try to play the stock market, you laugh to yourself inwardly.

"Uhhh... okay," you comply. "What would you like me to tell them?"

"The truth, sally." He always tries to make something that's ridiculously simple seem profound, the trick of all great wise men and seers.

"You got it," you tell him. "I'll see you later, I gotta git."

"Nope! You come here first," he insists and then gives you a feeble bear hug. You politely return the gesture of friendship (whatever that is). At least he doesn't smell as bad as the others. He's too stagnant to ever work up a sweat.

You both say "See ya" and you walk towards your mountain bike that's impatiently waiting for you. You unlock it and hop on. Its aluminum frame with its well-engineered design is almost as out of place among the hippies' old rusty bikes as you are among them. You hop on and it anxiously starts to roll forward on its own. You give it just a little help as you push down on the pedals with your powerful legs, speeding away towards home as night begins to settle on the town.

The smell of cooking marijuana overpowers even the dirty laundry in your small apartment. Ganja butter, nothing better. Betty Botter should have bought some. It would have made her bitter batter better. But not as good as yours; you make the best ganja goodies in town. You have to because you hate smoking. There are better ways to make ganja butter, but your method is about as good and much faster.

You clean half the weed to make your famous ganja goo-balls. Three of them will fuck anyone out of their skull for at least two hours. Oh, what the hell! Let's take a look at the recipe.

### GANJA GOO-BALLS

**One.** Clean the ganja, removing stems and seeds. Dispose them where police or nosy neighbors won't scrutinize the trash. Fry it in butter on low heat. Use **about three-fourths to one stick of butter for every thirty-five to forty dollars worth of ganja.** Cost is a good measure of the ganja's strength and that is what's important, not the amount you use. Figure about a buck per good dose. Fry it about thirty to forty minutes on low heat, maybe longer as heat helps convert the chemicals in the ganja to make it more potent. It will turn reddish brown. Just avoid burning it or it will taste like bong water and butter. Imagine that!

**Two.** When this is done pour the entire butter mix (weed and all) into three cups of dry one-minute oatmeal. If you want to, put the oatmeal in the pan to soak up any remaining butter. **Mix well!** **This keeps the dosage the same for each goo-ball.**

**Three.** Add three or four heaping tbs. of chocolate drink mix (Quik®). Optional.

**Four.** Add about six oz. of honey. (Weight oz., not liquid oz.)



**Five** Add one third cup of walnuts (chopped, of course). Mix this up as you're going along.

**Six** Add one large spoon-ful of peanut butter. (About two-thirds cup.

**Seven** Mix it well a final time and place the entire mess in the freezer about ten to twenty minutes to make it sticky.

**Eight** Form into one-inch balls by rolling.

One gets you a little stoned, two get you definitely stoned, and three will put you in orbit. For long term storage keep them in the freezer. Add more peanut butter or honey to make it stickier, if needed. Just don't use too much honey or it will be too sweet. Granola must be fried or the potency of the goo-balls is worthless and you've just blown about forty bucks. It's said that if while frying you add lecithin (an emulsifier that can be obtained at health food stores) the potency is improved. **Keep them out of the hands of kids or anyone else who will just think they're harmless cookies.** Also the buzz will sneak up on you in about thirty minutes. Don't eat ten of them thinking they're not very potent; they are. Believe it or not, there is such a thing as too stoned. It's just not as easy to get there by smoking. The cookies take about an hour to really affect you. Eating them on an empty stomach helps too. Now then, back to your story.

To the eighth oz. of weed you have left, you add a special surprise. You pull the small packet of powdered crack cocaine out from under some old ground coffee that you don't use (if coffee isn't fresh ground you won't touch it, but it's great for hiding drugs in so police dogs can't smell them as easily). You sprinkle just enough over the weed to give it that extra kick those dumb frat kids will love. You'd never touch the shit, but since you get it free from Joe, the local dealer who you occasionally supply chemicals to, it's not a problem to use it freely. Like this:

You undress and collapse into a large chair, grabbing a novel you're in the middle of before getting cleaned up for the party. The Woodpecker's nailing Princess Leigh Cherry again. Tom Robbins kicks ass. For a moment you settle back staring around your small, efficiency apartment, looking at the rock posters (Pink Floyd, Jethro Tull, Rush, a very old, you hate most of the newer popular rock, and the artwork, much of it your own from when you used to draw: a skeleton, a rat, a leopard, some illustrations copied from photographs, etc.). And your favorite: a poster of a nuclear bomb being set off. You put the novel down, deciding not to read it, and off the bookshelf pick up the human skull you stole from the biology department, that you had since spray-painted with glow-in-the-dark paint, just for laughs one night when you had one too many beers. For some unearthly reason staring into its eye sockets makes you laugh hysterically.

You jump out of the chair and grab your black, hardwood nunchucks and strike the padded weightlifting bench and the sit-up rack in rapid succession over and over. Any fool can learn to swing nunchucks through the air and catch them in fancy maneuvers, but to strike something and follow through is where the real skill lies. You practice blocking maneuvers with them, then toss them aside to practice a few kicks. You prop the futon against the wall and punch it until your fists won't open. Throwing the futon back down, you fall onto it, sweat dripping from every pore. After a minute's rest you grab your replica katana (samurai sword), slashing and stabbing at invisible foes, but quickly get bored with that; you'd prefer a real target. If not careful, you'd slice up everything in your apartment, making your furniture look like a scratching post for a pride of lions.

You stand naked and alone, eyes shut, embracing nothingness, the sword dangling in your right hand. Your breathing slows and your mind stretches outward, encompassing the void, the foundation of everything, just as you were taught to do as a young boy.

It seems as if eternity passes before a sudden knock on the door awakens you from your deep trance. For a brief moment, you wonder how much time has really passed by. Has it been about ten minutes, as the clock says, or has it been five billion trillion years? This feeling often nags at you.

You shrug it off, sheath your sword, put some shorts on, and answer the door, hoping it isn't Amy. It isn't.

Johnny boy! And also Little Alex, ah yes, you naughty vandals,' you exclaim in a corny nasal English accent, ripping off *A Clockwork Orange* (loosey movie, great book).

'Welly, welly, welly then, little droog, shall we itty off and see what this fine late summer snoochy has to offer?' says John.

Hang on, you drop the accent and jargon and pick up a semi-clean towel. 'Let me grab a quick shower.'

'Yah, but hurry,' says Alex, and adds, 'You got the pot?'

Worry not, I got the pot, and it don't take a lot to make your brain rot and turn to snot,' you say, sneering and toss the weed to Alex. He takes a look and looks rather pleased (Stevie really does see you some damn good weed) and hands you forty bucks.

Okay, Dr. Seuss, Take yer fuckin' shower, John orders, 'and be quick about it.'

'Yeah, yeah, You boys grab a beer outta the fridge while you wait,' you offer.

Now yer talkin' my kind of language! says Alex.

You make sure to hurry with the shower and get dressed, so hopefully they won't have time to drink too much of your expensive imported dark German beer.

Yeeeeeee Haawwww!' some large drunken idiot yells.

Whooo Hoooo! the cute petite girl he's carrying on his shoulders imitates while attempting to go under the limbo pole, but falls off and lands on the sand. Piggyback Limbo at the beach party, the beach made of two dump trucks worth of sand. These yuppie freaks always have to make up some stupid party theme. Any excuse to kill brain cells and time.

See those two couples over there,' says John, beer stein in hand, foam on his lips.

'Yeah, what about 'em?' you ask.

'Give 'em some goo-balls, we're all gonna fuck the girls later on,' he plainly states like it's the most natural thing in the world for any girl, he wants to ditch her boyfriend and drop her pants for a cheap buzz. Maybe he's right, even though the beer foam makes him look like a rabid dog.

'What the fuck?' How're you planning to do that, just by goo balls?' you ask, stupefied. 'I know they're good, but I don't think those guys'll trade their bitches for pot cookies.'

No, no, no, smartass. The cookies are just a distraction, this is the real secret. From his pocket he pulls out a small dropper bottle. Knock out drops. Tranquilizer, he grins.

'You're a filthy scumbag. I like it,' you yell, and let out a boisterous **WhaaHoooo!** thumping his chest with your fists. A coho makes you crazy. The big goon playfully puts you in a weak headlock so you twist his thumbs back (not too hard), grab his ankles, and flip him to the sand, laughing.

Quit playin', man, get to work, he struggles to say through his laughter as the two of you sit there with sand all over your clothes like grade school kids in a sand box.

Work? I wouldn't call it work,' you say, brushing sand off your jeans as easily as you've brushed the misdeeds of a lifetime from your conscience.

'Oh, hey man, by the way,' he catches you before you walk away, 'that's some fucking awesome herb you got for us.'

Before approaching the couple you ask one of the frat boys, 'Have a special cookie with even specialer ingredients?'

'Ah, yes, indeed. I believe these are the most superb creations I've ever tasted in my life,' he flatters you in his false Bostonian elitist accent then greedily asks, 'Can I take two?'

'No, better not,' you regretfully tell him. 'They've gotta go around. And they ain't cheap.'

But introduce me to those two couples standin' over there by themselves that I saw you talkin' to a minute ago. John says to give 'em some goo balls. if ya know what I mean," you wink.

"Hmmm. Good thinking. That John, quite the schemer he is." He then approaches the two couples, attempting to engage them in the festivities. "I want you to meet one of the greatest chefs in the world," he lies rather poorly. "Try one of these award-winning cookies. he insists, making up some story about how they won an award in France. They all take one out of the Ziploc bag. Yellow and blue make green.

"Wow, these are great," one girl says.

The rest all agree with her and start talking at once. "Mmmmm, yeah, these are excellent (Munch, munch, munch. What an interesting flavor! What do you put in them? (Munch.) Oh, secret recipe? Too bad, my mom would love it. It won awards in France? And Japan? Really?"

"Yes, really," you stretch the lie even further, wishing you had some milk for washing down the cookies, completing the innocent picture you're painting. They continue with the questions.

"Are you in school? What's your major? What year are you? Where are you from? Are you in the fraternity? No? How long have you known them?" are the typical routine. One of the boys asks, "Do you go to parties like this frequently?" as if it's a bit too wild for him. Just then, a fat, large, three-hundred-pound frat boy starts a beer-bong going, exemplifying the point as half a gallon of cheap beer swirls down the oversized funnel into the tube, and down his throat.

The other boy of these two couples is obviously an Asian, though he speaks fluent English. He's with the girl who likes your goo balls so much (she had two). You ask him, "What country are you from? How long have you been in the states? Do you like it here?" The conversation carries on like this for ten minutes, i.e. boring.

They start to leave, which will not do at all, so you inform them of a good movie and snacks inside. As they enter the hallowed halls of Eta Theta Pi, you add, "I'll join you in a minute."

The movie *Aliens* is half over by the time you finish socializing and go inside. John comes up and whispers, "The fun's about to start, we tranked the other beer, except that one girl you want's havin' Pepsi, says she's feelin' way too drunk."

"Yeah, heh, heh," except she ain't drunk. I gave her two goo balls," you say grinning.

"Ha ha ha, you dog, you. Ain't gonna be long and we'll all give her some goo balls, our own! Ha ha ha ha."

<Slap!>

"Christ! That's cold, man," you say, laughing as Alex slaps the passed-out Chinese guy across the face to make sure he's out. Everyone laughs as you twist the other guy's nose around and make him make fish faces. As you let go his head rolls onto his chest.

"Yep, they're out like a light," some idiot needlessly points out.

"Let's do it!" they all chorus and carry the unconscious girls into two separate bedrooms.

Being the provider of pot cookies, you get first crack at it, deciding on the girl who was with the Chinese male—she's much better looking than the other one, even though her tits aren't as big. John takes the other girl in another room, all for himself, the greedy pig. The others help you get your groins clothes off and remind you of the rules: (one) Use a rubber. (two) Leave no bruises or marks. This makes you laugh inwardly—the girls would have to know what happened to them the next day, they can't be that stupid. The frat boys leave you alone with her in the tiny frat-house bedroom and you get right to work, giving her little pussy a finger-wiggie to juice her up a bit first. She lets out a weak little groan, but keeps her eyes shut. You suck on her breasts for a minute and gently bite her nipples, just to make sure she's out cold. She is, no reaction. Your boner's



throbbing and ready for action as you spread her legs and plunge it in - of course without a rubber. Who do those idiot frat kids think you are? Wear a rubber when you don't have to - yeah, right. It's not like she's a whore or anything, so you don't have to worry about disease. You sink your cock deep into her and start humping away. She only lets out a small "Uh" as you thrust away faster and faster, squeezing her tits and occasionally French kissing her, though it's a bit pointless when she can't kiss back. You only stop once in a while to prolong the fun and tickle her with a little "Gruunh" - that's all you hear from her. Once you pull her eyelids back, just to check - yep, total zombie. And - Throughout all this the impatient frat boys excitedly chatter in the hallway outside. One knocks on the door and yells, "You done yet?"

"No!" you answer.

You pump away as fast as you can and, being quite the sex machine, it takes you about ten minutes to cum. Finally, in a state of bliss, you explode your load in her, but keep on banging away with every nerve ending sending a lightning bolt to your brain. Your dick goes limp and you pull out, go into the adjacent bathroom, and flush the toilet to make like you're disposing a rubber. You walk out of the bedroom, grinning like the Cheshire cat on cocaine and say "Next!" Five of the boys rush in the room, three of them already naked and semi-erect. God, frat boys are weird. At least you were able to get her to yourself for a while.

"I stopped by the party, where were you, out with some girl?" Amy accuses you with a pout, though not really meaning it - she does trust you, though you have no idea why.

You think you'll tease her a bit and say, "No, I was out with two girls." She punches you in the arm so you lie, "I was there at the party, but I went to the store for a few minutes around one thirty. When did you stop by the party?"

"Around one thirty," Amy sheepishly admits.

"And you only stayed about five minutes, right?" you guess.

"Yeah," she says, "next time we'll plan on a place to meet."

"Well, it probably won't work, but we'll try," you try to appease her and add with the proverbial gleam in your eye, "But for right now, it's only two thirty and I'm not tired at all."

"You're never tired," she whines.

"Complaining?" you ask, pulling her in close and sucking on her neck - that drives her crazy.

"No, not at all!" she almost yells as she pulls your shirt off.

You both strip in a few seconds. You pull her down on the futon, licking her little pussy, making her squeal. You move up her body, feeling her wriggle under your tongue. You suck on her nipples as hard as you can while sticking two fingers inside her. She screams like a banshee from the pits of Hell, grabbing you and practically forcing you inside her, but you manage to grab a rubber out of your wallet first - no babies for you yet, thanks. She gets on top for a while, but soon tires and then you take over. After twenty minutes you switch to doggy style and then quickly cum. You and Amy get in the shower and your prick starts to rise yet again. You turn off the shower and grab her hand, leading her out onto the balcony. She's reluctant at first, but then it's late and dark out so no one will see. You keep on for another thirty minutes. Her screams make several people look out the windows, but she has her back to them and doesn't notice. Finally you feel you've had enough and go back inside, shower again, and go to bed, hoping next weekend turns out like this - so typical.

The last thing Amy says to you before she nods off, her head resting on your shoulder, is "Sometimes I think you're not human."

"Sometimes I think you may be right," you admit.

## HOMF

Countless tiny points of light surround and guide me through the infinite darkness that has become my home. Each one calling out, "Me next, me next." Patience, little ones, patience, your time will come. So much light amidst all this darkness. Or is it the other way around? And from where did I originate? I must know the answer, but dwelling on the question will attain me nothing. No matter how I come in due time. So much darkness among all this light. As the light guides, so the darkness supports. But how am I ever to see it all?

Over immense distance, they appear minuscule and meaningless. The giant globes of hydrogen fusion—light-years away have long ago designated and plotted my course, leading me from one to another like a pencil tracing dot-to-dot lines in a child's book. Where are they leading me? What will this picture be that was drawn long before I even began? And how long must I remain in the dark gulfs in between?

If only I could sleep, but here in the dark, cold void, sleep leads to death—death swift and sure by meteor or any chunk of ice as I crash into it at 20,000,000 kph, destroying my brain or solar panels. To sleep is to be defenseless. My programming will not allow it. And so I crave, ever vigilant through the unending darkness. So much time spent dwelling in the cold void spaces between the stars, searching for one more grain of knowledge to add to my collection.

Although my emotions had long since died before my quest even began, I am still plagued by a nagging sensation that with all this time spent here in the dark void, that I am becoming part of it. Or is it becoming me?

The restaurant is a bit crowded with families celebrating their sons and daughters graduating from college. Old Chinese music whines over the speakers at a low volume. It's a good thing you don't understand Chinese: the song goes something like this. Whang soooong looo yoww eenng gae sie. Translated it means: God, white people are so stupid they'll eat anything. Yes, even that.

You've always loved oriental food, especially when someone else picks up the tab. You'll have the stir-fried spicy squid and the Vietnamese coffee. You order at your graduation dinner. Thank God the day is about done: all the stupid photographs you had to be in, and the unbearably long and boring ceremony. Let's not think about that; let's just enjoy the dinner.

I'll have the same, your dad says. You and he always had similar tastes. Odd though it is, you hardly ever spend time together. It's probably for the best: you think assholes never get along. Do squids have assholes? And will you and your father be eating them?

"What? You have to talk louder. I can't hear you." Oh, I'll have the sweet and sour pork and a Coke, your grandfather orders. It gives you an inner laugh to see the oldest Jew at the table order pork, but somehow it's appropriate: only an enlightened individual can realize an archaic rule that was meant to keep people from eating trichinosis-infected meat no longer applies. But then how the hell could anyone who's enlightened order sweet and sour? "Disgusting!" But then you suppose that's just typical of someone who would wear a fluorescent glittering paisley sack.

I'll have Kung Po Shrimp. Good choice, grandma. And a hot tea.

I'll have aniced tea and the chicken chow mien. There's no pork in that, is there? Duh! Someone needs to tell your mom to pull her head out of her ass. You think that you must have been adopted. The combination of weird and stupid do not mix. Why she ever converted to Judaism twenty years after she and your dad divorced is beyond your comprehension. At least her conservative Christian parents died before that. They probably turned over in their graves though disturbing a colony of worms.

Religion: what a joke. God is dead. God is good. Death is good. So then Death is God. No—if Death is good and God he'd wipe out all the stupid people on Earth. Death must be an asshole. No—if it weren't for the majority of people being stupid then you wouldn't have it made now would you? But then if Death were an asshole you wouldn't get along with him. But do you? He's obviously never come to pay you a visit. A serious visit, that is. Hmmm. Maybe because you're an asshole. Oh well, he'd have to come see you some day. Won't he? Oh, of course he will, with his long black robe and scythe. That must be a great job. If ever he retires you'll have to put in an application. Christ. Why do you keep having these stupid mental conversations with yourself? Oh. Duh. As if it isn't obvious: it beats talking to your family.

The rest of them order and your cousin orders last. Cantonese lobster, the most expensive thing on the menu. Doesn't it figure? He'll make a great lawyer some day. Oh well, your dad's paying, so let him go ahead and feed the world.

It takes about five minutes for the coffee to drip through the metal filter into the small cup containing sweetened condensed milk. Ahhhh, but it's worth it. It's not an uncommon method of preparing coffee in the Orient and South America. Why the hell coffee is served any other way is one of the great mysteries of life. Perhaps it says something about human nature. Or perhaps you're just too Goddamn philosophical. But the flavor is one of the most intense pleasures known.

"So, exactly what is it you're going to do in graduate school?" I mean I know it's chemistry, but I don't understand what you're going to do with it. Your grandfather always did get into the most boring topics. You know he won't understand and, even if he did, he'd forget the next day. What the hell. Let's humor the old fart.



"I'll tell you what he'll do," your dad jokingly cuts in. "He'll get bored with chemistry and come work on the horse ranch."

"You wish!" you retort, hoping one day he'll abandon that stupid fantasy. "Well, grandpa, it's mostly spectroscopy. You understand that all matter absorbs some type of light, right?"

"Yes, but..."

"So matter absorbs light, so if you measure the intensity and wavelength of the light that is absorbed, then that can tell you about the structure of whatever chemical it is you're working with." You're losing the attention as everyone listens to you oversimplify a complicated topic. Only your dad and grandma seem to realize you're being an asshole.

"Well, okay. So..."

"Furthermore," you don't let him get in a word trying to provoke him. "every type of molecule does this differently, so these spectra—that's what the resulting graphs are called—not only can tell you about the structure of a molecule, but are also sort of like fingerprints."

"Okay, so give me..."

"An example..."

"Quit interrupting me! Don't you have any respect when people are trying to talk to you? All the time you're interrupting already." You knew you'd get him riled up. He's hilarious when he's mad, with his Yiddish accent. "Why do you always interrupt?!" he screams, drawing the attention of people at nearby tables.

"I was just kidding. It was just in fun," you calmly say with the biggest shit-eating grin on your face. "You should give it a try some..."

"I don't see what's fun about it. Why do you think it's fun?"

"It just breaks the monotony..."

"You just like being a smart-ass," he loudly says. "It's going to get you into trouble some day. You don't like being interrupted, do you?"

"I honestly don't mind when it's in fun. There's times..."

"It may be fun for you, but it's not for me. Now continue," he tells you.

"I was just gonna say there's times when being a smart-ass is kind of funny. I was just playing," you half-assed apologize then explain. "Sometimes I can tell what people are going to say as they start to say it. You were going to ask me for a practical example of what I do, right?"

"That still doesn't give you the right to interrupt your grandfather." Your grandmother is one of the few people you listen to seriously, she only talks when it's important. "I know you're just joking, but it's not polite. Do you ever notice what a jerk you are when you drink coffee?" Ouch, that one hurt. "And you kids down there quit laughing before I get up and smack you one. He's not funny and you're only encouraging him!" she yells at your cousin and stepsisters who are cracking up, but then she lets out a little laugh herself to lighten the mood.

"You're right, grandma. I'm sorry, grandpa. I didn't mean anything by it." That apology is a little better than the one before.

"Well, okay, now tell us what you're doing with your research. Something with batteries, if I remember correctly," your grandpa continues.

"Yeah, we use spectroscopy to study materials used in lightweight, rechargeable polymer electrolyte batteries. Different ratios of lithium to polymer work better than others and we try to figure out why so the batteries might be improved," you explain, keeping it vague so you don't get any questions. Then you add, lying, "Real exciting stuff," so they won't all know how miserable with your research you really are.

You think to yourself what a pity it is that science is so arbitrarily fragmented these days. Within science there is physics, chemistry biology botany medicine, math, etc. etc. Within chemistry there is physical chemistry, inorganic chemistry organic chemistry analytical chemistry and biochemistry (though the boundaries aren't very clear). Within physical chemistry (your area) there is spectroscopy, theoretical chemistry electrochemistry etc., etc. And within each type of research you have subsystems within subsystems within subsystems. and that all gets very tedious. You wonder if you're cut out for it.

"So can you make money with this?" your grandfather asks. It always gets down to money.

"Yes, I'm sure I'll find work somewhere—it's a pretty diverse field, and," you say with emphasis, "the pay should probably start out around forty thousand a year."

"Well, at least you're not getting into trouble like you always did when you were a kid." Okay, okay, rub it in grandpa. If he only knew the truth. Oh well.

"Too bad Amy couldn't come to dinner," your dad quickly changes the subject to avoid another argument breaking out.

"Hmm. No, not really, things aren't great between us right now. She's just so dumb. I don't think it'll ever get serious," you understate, hoping the squid and their funky chewy assholes hurry up and get cooked.

"She's a nice girl," your dad pushes you. "It doesn't take a rocket scientist to make you happy—look who I married," he refers to his new wife with that same shit-eating grin you gave your granddad earlier. Coincidentally she kicks him under the table, not much boob jiggle though.

"Yeah, at least you did better the second time than the first," you say referring to your mom wearing that same grin again.

As if to prove you're right, your mom asks, "So are you still doing artwork?" when she knows you haven't in at least five years.

"Uh. No! Are you still riding horses?" You know she hasn't in over twenty five years, since you were a little kid. You can't even remember seeing her on one. But you hate it when people bring up your artistic past. God, what a waste of time that was.

Ahhhh, good, here comes the soup. Thank God! Family sucks! This is boring. So what isn't? Hmm. Let's see.

The mist rising off the swamp is thicker than ghosts in a graveyard. The only discernible sounds are those of heavy desperate panting, far off barking dogs, and howling men. Then there is the sound of mud sucking a man's feet. He backs away from the swamp when he sees an alligator on the other side. He should have risked the alligators, they're only hungry.

"That he is. The dogs have him!"

"Whooo hoooo. We's gonna roast us a heathen nigga."

"Hot damn! I want my boy here to see what we do with Satan-lovin' niggas!"

"Hold the dogs back while I shoot him out o' the tree."

"Don't kill him—just shoot him in the leg!"

<Boom! Chka. Boom! Whad>

"That got him. Git around him, don't let him git ahead o' ya. He's a vicious bastard!"

"Tha's it, git these ropes on him."

"Yeee hawww. We's got him. We's gonna have us a nigga-roast."

"I told that nigga not to make them heathen devil-dolls and he just keeps on a doin' it. Runs away after I beat him for it. I shoulda knowd better n'ta buy a African jungle nigga. They's too stupid, an' don't even speak no English."

"He's got it comin' huh pa?"

"Hee hee, tha s right boy he shore daz!"

"Can I l ight the ogs, huh pa?"

"Shore, boy."

Time passes slowly for the black man as the lynch mob piles logs around the tree he is tied to. Smoke billows from the green wood and flames crackle, slowly licking away at the shiny dark skin like a rough feline tongue scraping the meat from a chunk of prey. A breeze carries the heat away from the man's torso, making the torture longer. The eggs go first and the juices ooze from them as if they were ripe pieces of sweet fruit. The screams soon weaken into dry rasps and seem almost musical with a soft, mystical rhythm. The fire rises around the man's groin and waist, burning a rope in two, making him slump down the tree closer to the fire. The meat on one egg cracks and spits open like one of the pieces of wood around him. The hiss of a thousand angry serpents escapes from the burning wood as blood and melted fat seep out over the logs. Suddenly the black man's eyes snap open and with the clearest voice, in perfect English, he speaks the most bone-chilling words any man in the lynch mob will ever hear in their entire lives.

"We are soup." Then he dies.

The universe in which this happens is very similar to ours with one exception. Its existence only lasted for about two point three six times ten to the negative nine trillion eight hundred six billion four hundred thirty seven million one hundred sixty thousand and twenty four seconds, i.e. a very, very short time. As so the size of this universe is about on the same order of magnitude in cubic centimeters. The actual event just witnessed was, of course, even much shorter and smaller than its universe. When this universe collapsed another with similar life forms appeared in its place and so on. Exactly where in our universe did it take place?

"Slurrrrrppp." Your grandfather always did eat rather noisily.

"We are soup?" you mumble to yourself through a mouthful of chewy wonton.

"Hmm? You say something?" your dad asks.

"Uh... just wondered what's in the soup... tastes great."

So it's finally over, you think to yourself while checking the coffee plants in your greenhouse in the chemistry building attic. The place isn't really a greenhouse because the lighting is artificial but it works. Coffee plants don't need a huge amount of light anyway. But who cares—it ain't your electricity. So you've finally got your B.S. degree in chemistry. B.S. is putting it mildly. The legendary bovine feces. Should you get an M.S. (more of the same) or a Ph.D. piled higher and deeper? We'll cross that bridge when the time comes.

The humidity levels all check out okay. The soil pH is at the right level. Oh well. Like so many beans you've exposed to mutagenic chemicals, another one, as they say, bites the dust. No surprise though—it's a bit disappointing. This is the sixth experimental bean to even sprout. Of course your crossbreeds are doing fair, some of them quite well actually. However the caffeine content of their leaves is normal. And when the plants mature (probably in another two years) they may not even produce beans, many crossbreeds have this problem. Oh well—it's just a hobby, nothing to get serious about. Although you are getting quite a name for yourself in botany due to the crossbreeds that you've invented. But they're nothing special. Nothing commercially viable, that is. It all seems like a big waste of time. Perhaps when you backmailed the president of the university you should've asked for money instead of this stupid lab.



But wait. **"Holy shit! Oh my God! Yes!"** you scream. It worked! It actually worked. You never expected it to, but there it is, right in front of your eyes—a new coffee sprout. But this one's special, more than the others anyway. It came from one of the three hundred beans you exposed to X rays in the X-ray diffractometer (used for determining crystal structures). Each seed was only exposed for a half hour, but apparently only this one survived somehow while the rest died. You stare at the odd sprout in disbelief for a full twenty minutes before checking the soil, pH and moisture levels. Everything's A-Okay. All the other plants are doing normal. So you make a few entries in your lab notebook, highlighting the part about the X-ray mutant, deciding to call it XRM for short (bloody scientists and their acronyms, damn them to Hell). It probably won't live, but the fact that it grew at all is something remarkable in and of itself.

How to celebrate the success before going out on the town for a good night's drunk with all the college kids who are leaving for the summer? Of course, a coffee. What else?

You close up the greenhouse-lab and set your security devices. No one's going to steal your precious plants, that's for sure.

As you walk down the campus sidewalk there's a magnificent sunset that lends all the old buildings a warm look. You see several people wearing caps and gowns, getting their pictures taken with flashes. It's starting to get dark. Then you suddenly hear a couple arguing at the steps of the art department building near the museum. The girl's crying and carrying a baby, only a few weeks old from the looks of it. By the most outstanding coincidence you recognize the couple and duck aside so they won't see you approaching. He's wearing a cap and gown.

"I can't believe I married you. I thought it was the honorable thing to do. I thought the baby was mine, **but you cheated on me!**" he yells.

"I did not. I told you," she sobs.

"Do you expect me to believe that story about you being raped at that party where we were passed out?!"

"It's true. I—"

"If it's true then why didn't you say something then? You're lying, that's why. That's what I get for trusting an American girl. To think I once loved you. Now it's all I can do to look my family in the eye. Tomorrow I go back to China and I hope to never see you again." And he turns on his heels and walks away, leaving the girl crying hysterically and clutching the baby to her chest.

You peek around the corner, not daring to get any closer. Though it's hard to restrain yourself from reaching out and going, "Goochie, goochie, goo."

Ah, it's too bad the P's got busted for all the illegal shit they were doing. Got two years probation during which they can't operate as an official fraternity. Oh well, others will take their place next year.

"Hi, be with you in a moment. Okay, what'll you have?" the cute little blonde girl behind the counter at the coffee shop asks you.

"Blood on the gods today, Jennifer," you order.

"Uh, double espresso latte?" she asks, remembering your eccentricities.

"Yep," you reply and add, "I'm feeling mighty good today. I graduated and just fathered two babies, one green, one pink."

"A green baby?" she inquires. "How did you manage that? Wait—on second thought, I'm afraid to even know what you're talking about, but congratulations anyway."

### **Don't Read This**

Kill a fat man for being unsightly Kill a little child for being too energetic Kill a hippie for getting stoned Kill a Jew for being too smart or rich—and having strange beliefs Kill an Asian for working too hard and taking away your jobs Kill a black man for looking and smelling different—and because his penis is bigger than yours Kill an American Indian for wanting his land back Kill a woman for wanting equal rights Kill a queer for sticking his penis in another man's butt Kill a lesbian because she's getting what you're not Kill a white man for owning everything and wanting more—and because his penis is too small Kill a freak so he won't breed Kill a retard so you won't have to put up with him Kill a dog for barking too much Kill a bird for being too free Kill a cat for killing a bird Kill everyone who isn't like you and eventually we will all be the same—living in perfect harmony with no worries or strife, no war or hatred There will be nothing but peace and smiles all round The world will be perfect as God intended and what a beautiful world it will be Amen

<Ka-Chud. Ka-Chud. Ka-Chud.> the pump on the HPLC (high-pressure liquid chromatography) machine softly churns away. You're not totally familiar with this particular machine, but it's fairly simple. Dr. Back, the analytical chem. professor, was kind enough to let you use his equipment (a common practice in chemistry departments). Modern day labs are quite a bit different from what most people think about when they hear the words "chemistry lab." They're mostly filled with big, fancy machines costing from tens of thousands of dollars on up to millions. It's not so much anymore the bubbling reactions, colorful liquids, noxious fumes, the occasional explosion, etc. - the reasons you got into chemistry. Oh well. Like a high-tech dope-pusher, you take the syringe filled with methanol containing extract from one-half gram of dried XRM coffee leaves, and inject it into the sample port, then set the chart recorder running. The HPLC junkie relaxes once it gets its fix.

Dum de dum. <whistle> thumb twiddle. The pen slides up and down across the paper as the graph slowly rolls out. Here're the first peaks: light miscellaneous organic compounds yawn, stretch, ho hum. okay, here it comes, the caffeine peak.

"Yes! Holy shit! It's off the scale!" Uh...oops. You hope no one heard you. Heh, heh. Poltymouth.

After recalibrating the machine and rechecking everything, all tests show the leaves have three point one times the caffeine of normal *arabica* plants the same age. Of course people don't use coffee leaves, but the ratio of caffeine from leaf to bean should be roughly the same from one plant to the next, you hope. On the other hand, this is a new type of plant, entirely similar to coffee, but definitely not coffee, not with those peculiar jagged leaves. Who knows what the hell the coffee will taste like. That's if the weird thing even produces beans. It probably won't though, nothing's that easy. Even if it does they're probably be too small or have aousy flavor. Oh well. You'll just have to wait a couple more years to find out.

You really don't have time to be messing with this crap. Your supervising professor, Dr. Feckstein, that fat, bald geek with the magnifying glass spectacles and the ugly paid slacks, who you always call the evil Dr. Frenkenstein (behind his back, of course) has been nagging at you to get more work done. Awww. Fuck it! Who gives a shit about those stupid battery compounds and the spectroscopy anyway? How the hell he ever talked the US Air Force and National Science Foundation into funding his research with two-and-a-half million bucks is beyond belief. Either he knows the right people, he's a great con artist, these bureaucracies are more stupid than a retarded earthworm, or all of the above. Probably the latter. Shit, shit, shit. You really need to get your lazy ass back to the lab and start a new experiment. Naww, fuck it. Let's go to the coffeehouse.

"Hey Peaches. Whazzup?" you holler at your young friend across the noisy coffeehouse dining area and lunchtime crowd. A lot of young kids hang out here, mainly because they can't go to bars yet. He's a weird kid, but fairly intelligent for his age, and a great guitar player. If you had to describe him in one sentence it would be "That tall, skinny motherfucker can play." But if you had one more sentence, and you do, you'd say he's basically just one of those crazy high school kids that try to dress as unconventionally as possible, mostly in black with chains, black lipstick and fingernail polish, funny looking brightly colored felt hats, pin on slogan buttons that say things like "I carry mace." And a

sword and shield' etc., etc. It all sort of varies from one kid to the next, but generally speaking, that about sums it up.

Christ! How do kids get into their idiotic fashions? Let's see... there're yuppies, neo-hippies, cowboys (who've probably never even been on a horse), goth kids (like Peaches), skinheads, punkers, gangstas, and on and on and on. Kids are so stupid.

Peaches is sitting with a bunch of his friends, talking about some new fantasy role playing game, discussing hit points, finding health (yeah right, how real stic), and some new kind of funny dice. **Boring!** How can kids get into that crap? This world's got enough real dragons to slay. How can these lazy sugs be happy with imaginary ones? You daydream yourself with green scales and leathery wings, breathing fire all over them and watching them turn into charred cinders. **No! Help me! Aaarrgh!**

"Hey man, what's goin' on? How're the coffee plants?" Peaches asks. He's one of the few people who take interest in your crazy hobbies. Or at least pretends to, to be polite.

"Pretty good. That oddball plant that sprouted about a year ago got big enough to take some leaves from. And... get this... caffeine three times higher than a regular coffee plant. So it be gettin' you three times higher. Well, maybe, if it makes beans. God, I hope it makes beans. It's makin' me anxious. I don't want to think about it right now. So how's the music comin' along?"

"Pretty good. I'm workin' on a new song. This is Allison," he introduces the girl he's got his arm around.

"Hi," you say shaking hands with her. "What's a gorgeous babe like you doin' goin' out with an ugly barn like this?" She really is pretty hot, you think.

"Ha, ha," she says sarcastically. "Nice to meet you too."

"Look who's callin' who ugly!" Peaches laughs. "Ignore him, he's harmless." Famous last words.

"Aww. I'm just playin'," you say speaking to Allison. "You got a good man there. What he lacks in looks he makes up for in talent."

"Not to mention other things," she says with a sly grin. Peaches blushes then changes the subject ignoring his friends laughing at him.

"Hey, you gotta come to my birthday party in two weeks," he insists.

"What day?" you ask.

"June twenty-sixth through the thirtieth. Here's an invitation."

"Huh? It took you five days to be born? You must have been a fat fuckin' baby you tease him."

"No, smart-ass, but the party lasts five days. You'll be there, right?"

"Well, sure, but I don't think I'll be there five days. How did you talk your dad into that?"

"I do it every year. My dad's pretty cool. The party mostly rocks on the weekend, and the weekdays are pretty me low... mostly folks sittin' around jammin'. I got a new guitar. I'm breakin' in it."

"Cool. Hey, I'm gonna go sit outside and clear my head," you say throwing in "see ya later" to everyone and "nice meeting you" to Allison, thinking she'd be one absolutely wild fuck.

As you walk outside onto the roofed patio you see a pleasant surprise: Smiles is there. He's one of the local hippies. He's a bit odd though, even for a hippie: hardly ever says a



word (a quality you wish more people had). He mostly just plays his North American Indian flute (he's white, though). Like he's doing now. The sound is eerie yet peaceful. Perhaps eerie because it reminds us of a race, culture, and simple way of life we've destroyed. Perhaps peaceful because... well... just because it is. You nod hello, he nods back. At various tables there are students eating lunch or a snack or drinking coffee or tea. There is also a young couple with a little girl (you guess she's two), but they're on their way out. As they leave the little girl waves at Smiles. He waves back smiling, of course. Smiles plays a few more tunes and then also leaves. A sudden feeling of void overtakes you, not the void around you, which you embrace during meditation, but a certain void... inside your soul? Like something's missing? Nah. That's stupid! It's too nice a day to think shit like that. You gulp down the mocha coffee and go back to the lab to get some work done so your professor doesn't have a hernia.

"Yeeee Haw!" some drunken kid yells

"Whaaaa Hooo!" the girl, he's carrying on his shoulder imitates as she beats another girl being carried by another drunken kid, over the head with a padded wooden and plastic sword. At least they're both wearing helmets and it does make an amusing spectacle. It almost looks magical, as an occasional passing firefly lights up its ass while flying around them.

There's quite a bit of old furniture just sitting around outside in the back yard, rotting away. You take up an entire couch for yourself by propping your legs up on it. The position you sit in allows you a great view of Adison's legs, just so you can look without looking like you're looking. Her muscular tan legs seem to run on forever before the dress cuts off the view at her upper thigh. She's a bit taller than you, though not quite as tall as Peaches. Under her formy dress you can tell she has no bra and her perky round breasts are almost visible, not too big or too small, the nipples protruding slightly. Her long brown hair comes down to the middle of her back and she wears no makeup... doesn't need it. Any paint added to her high cheek bones, full, pouty lips, and cute button nose would ruin the canvass. You'd really like to get under that dress and see what lies beyond forever. Damn, why does that ring a bell? Probably nothing.

Of course she has her head resting in Peaches' lap as they lounge on the love seat. Puke. Love, what a joke. You wish that Amy wasn't mad at you, but then who can blame her with the way you treat her. It sure would be nice to get some tonight though. Maybe you think, you'll call her tomorrow and apologize. But that's tomorrow.

"Hey Peaches, one more song," you insist

"Aww man," he protests

"Peaches! Peaches!" you start a chant going and, of course, all the other kids join in.

"Okay okay quiet down, you'll piss off the neighbors," he gives in.

"Awww fuck the neighbors," some other kid yells

"You fuck the neighbors. I wouldn't even kiss 'em," another kid says

As Peaches gets up to play, Adison moves over, ruining your great view. Oh well, it's just a view.

So Peaches plays a few more songs and starts with this serious piece about love (except he does it really serious, not comical like most love songs). Then he does a number about sex, whipped cream, and puppies, making everyone laugh hysterically. But it's all done

rather well. He makes his new guitar vibrate with crazy rhythms that no one's ever heard before. The small speakers he's hooked up to (or, we should say, that his guitar is hooked up to) scream like virgins cumming as he slides his left hand up and down the neck, picking and strumming with his right. Some of the other kids keep a beat with bongos and simple drums, even you join in for a bit. Another kid gets in with a bass guitar, but he's rather pathetic trying to keep up with Peaches. Man, o, Peaches might really be great some day.

Between songs everyone keeps refilling his or her plastic cup with cheap box wine. Box wine—it has to be one of the most tasteless inventions, ranking only behind chewing tobacco, plastic dog poop, country and western music, and the inflatable sheep sex doll. Well, at least these kids love it, but then so do you, for what it does to them. Christ, you could probably drink a whole damn box of this shit and not feel it. Ahh, but that doesn't mean you can't act like you do.

"Sheesh! Peaches! that's w!sh fuckin' great. Have some more wine," you offer a cup to Peaches.

"Nah. I would if we had some beer," he gives you a hopeful look.

"Let's go to the store then. I'll buy," you offer.

A high degree of whooping and hollering breaks out and one of the kids volunteers to drive.

"I'll take that wine," Allison says. "This is working better than you'd hoped."

Well, we've been to a thousand and one parties like this before. Right? Right! So let's skip all the bullshit. That's unless, of course, we want to hear Peaches play again, which we can't really because we're reading this, unless we really want to watch a bunch of kids throw up (Grrroophff. Hurrgh. <Splatter splatter>), or unless we want to hear all the high school jokes (What's eighteen inches long, blue, and makes women scream? Crib death). Do we really want to re-live all this silly nonsense again? Good, we thought not.

"It's right here," you say to Dan, the kid driving you home. "No, I can make it upstairs okay."

"Cool man. Hey, like stop by the party tomorrow night. See ya," he says.

"Okay, shee ya," you say and stagger to the stairway leading up to your apartment. When you see the car go around the corner you dart up the stairs in just a few seconds with perfect agility. In the apartment you strip and put on your black jogging pants, long-sleeve shirt, and old running shoes. Under your shirt you strap on a boot knife, a pouch with five shuriken (a.k.a. Chinese throwing stars), and a canister of spray tear gas. Best to travel light tonight, but then, it would be so much fun to take the sword. Oh, come on now. Let's not be ridiculous. Sheesh! You're a silly bastard. Oh, yeah, can't forget the mask and gloves, now can we?

The three-mile jog back to Peaches' house is no problem at all. you do at least that distance every morning. (Well, about every morning.) It only takes you about twenty-five minutes at a nice slow comfortable pace. Christ, you're getting slow in your old age. Another year-and-a-half and you'll hit the big three-oh. This is crazy, you're getting way too old to be doing this shit. Tomorrow you'll ask Amy to move in with you. That should keep her happy for a while. And maybe your eternally hard pecker as well. Who knows, it might keep you from doing this kind of dangerous crap. Maybe—we'll see. Christ, you can't believe you're

actually doing this. Oh well, fuck it, you deserve a bit of excitement in your life—at least give it a try

The rope on the tire swing is kind of small and a bit hard to climb, but not impossible. Good thing you brought the gloves. The tree branch hangs down over the roof and you cautiously make your way over and drop down. There's no need to worry about being heard, of course, not with the music blaring away in the house. You can even barely feel the thump, thump of the speakers vibrating the roof under your feet. Three-thirty a.m. and the party's still rockin' hard. The bedroom window slides up. Good. But then you expected it to; you did unlock it earlier.

'I've told you kids a hundred Goddamn times to stay off the fuckin' roof!' Peaches' granddad yells at you from another window as you duck inside. Hopefully he won't come after you, the deaf insomniac old geezer. You hide in the closet a few minutes. He doesn't. He's probably used to masked people wearing all black, looking like ninja wannabes, climbing all over the house, that's just the type of kids that hang out over here. Then again, 'What if he's calling the cops?' Ah, good, there's a phone. <Burrrr> Dial tone. Good. You smile thinking sometimes excessive technology (like a phone in near every room) can be a pretty damn useful thing.

And there she sleeps, all curled up like a baby. About in the same position you left her in when you, Peaches, and Dan carried her up here to sleep off the wine. Hopefully in the dark room she won't recognize you're not Peaches. It's a crazy idea, but who knows, she is drunk as shit (not that shit ever drinks, though). It just might work.

Holy shit (Jesus, poop?) Of course how obvious. This is too perfect, the Halloween mask Peaches was wearing earlier. What a wonderful piece of plastic gore—a big green pus scar on one cheek with an eyeball dangling on the other. It's almost like destiny. Maybe it is. There you go getting silly again. Focus, man, focus.

Luckily the mask fits over your back. Lightweight ski mask made with a new polymer fabric—keeps you warm and also lifts moisture away from your skin to keep you dry. (The 'warm' part kind of sucks—it is June.) It's the latest rave with bank robbers and drive-by-shooting gangsters—it leaves few fibers behind at the scene of the crime, typical of so many of the space-age fabrics you have on. That's why you bought them.

'Boo!' you holler at her through the Halloween mask, not worrying about the noise you make (loud music downstairs, remember). Hmm. No reaction. You suck on her neck, not easy through two masks.

Hee, hee. Shtop it, Peachesh. I'm druuunk, go away," she protests.

"Nuh uh," you mumble in a low voice through the masks, hoping she won't figure out you're not Peaches.

'I said shtop. Oooo. Ooooo. Peaches!' Mmm, you devil. 'Oh! What's got into you?!' She seems to instantly sober up.

You roll her over onto her stomach and sit on her back, tickling her to make it seem like innocent horseplay at first. Then it gets serious. You caress her back and neck a few minutes then slide your right hand up her dress, grabbing her breasts with the other. Firm as bricks. It's amazing. Holy shit! Buddha dang? No panties. This is too easy. You hoist her up into doggie position.

'Oh, yes, okay, do it. Give it to me. And it better be good for you to wake m— OH God! Yes!'

Hump, pump, slam bam, slurp, slish, scream, moan. Mmmmm yesss, here it comes (cums?) It's been several days and, Christ, do you have a load saved up

"Uhhh Peaches I'm gonna be sick Uugh"

You get the most hilarious idea You pull out and climb over to the other side of the bed

"No Don't! I'm gonna be s mphfff!"

"Uhhhh, unh" you moan as you explode down her throat

"You bastard Cough, cough, sptoo! You fucking son of a b Whruff Whaaaarrgh." <Splatter splatter> Ughhh I hope you're happy cause that's the last time you ever Why are you going out the **EEEEEEEEEE'!! You're not Peaches!**

"Thaaaaat's right, Alison Bob, tell our lovely contestant what she's just won

"Well, Johnny it looks like she's won what lies behind curtain number two Let's taaaake a look Yes, Johnny she could have won the brand new car behind curtain number one or she could have won the washer and dryer behind curtain number three but it looks like she's won a luxurious lifetime vacation *in Hell!* Awww too bad Better luck next time you play *The Game Show of Life* Alison"

(Cue cheesy theme music and fade to commercial)

Ha, ha, ha, ha Shit, shit, shit You're not Peaches and you're not cream either That scream would have been heard even over the music You jump off the roof, hit the ground, roll, and get up running as fast as you can As you go around the corner you see the light come on in the bedroom window but keep on running as if your life depends on it (which it does) You don't slow down til several blocks away but keep on at a steady pace Take off the damn Halloween mask Tuck it in your shirt Huff puff Tires screeching in the distance Sirens now heading your way Shit, shit, shit and still more shit You duck under a bush and barely avoid being seen as a searchlight from the police car flashes over the bush Mental note You need a gun Shit! Gotta make it to the creek Cop's gone Run Hop the fence Good, the creek Double shit! Oh well you just have to get wet Splash wade, wade Far back a searchlight from a cop car on the bridge shines down the creek Good, it leaves It'll be slow going down the creek like this Oh well won't be as long as a prison stay that's for sure

You find yourself two miles away near a pond You take off your back mask and shirt roll them up and place them inside the Halloween mask The mask and clothes sink into the pond weighted down by a large rock The weapons? No, you can't bring yourself to sink them They're safe to hold onto, you didn't use them So you stash them in a hollow log near the pond Okay now remember where you put them What to do? Can't hit the streets, it's a five mile walk back home because you ran in the opposite direction First rule when running from cops Never run toward where you live The cops will be looking for anyone on foot Okay stay here for the night in the morning jog back home Then throw away the pants and shoes Yeah Great plan.

<Slap!> Damn mosquitoes!

You pass the remainder of the night listening to frogs mating in the pond If only life were that simple Croak, ribbet, fuck, leap, splash swim, croak, leap, ribbet, fuck All night orgies all spring and summer long Then sleep all winter What more could you ask for?



## Madelung Constants of Higher Dimensionality

The Madelung constant of  $D$  dimensions is defined as such

$$M_D \equiv \sum_{\mathbf{x} \neq 0} \frac{(-1)^{x_1 + x_2 + \dots + x_D}}{(x_1^2 + x_2^2 + \dots + x_D^2)^{D/2}} \quad (\text{always negative}) \quad (\text{Eqn 1})$$

Note: For this summation the point  $(0, 0, 0, \dots, 0)$  is excluded

The most common application of the Madelung constant is for the crystal stabilization of 3-dimensional orthogonal (cubic) crystals such as NaCl. Other types of crystals have similar equations that apply. These will not be discussed here.

Another type of summation, which I just give the symbol  $S_d$ , is defined as such

$$S_d \equiv \sum_{\mathbf{x} \neq 0} \frac{(-1)^{x_1 + x_2 + \dots + x_d}}{(x_1^2 + x_2^2 + \dots + x_d^2)^{d/2}} \quad \begin{pmatrix} \text{negative for odd } d \\ \text{positive for even } d \end{pmatrix} \quad (\text{Eqn 2})$$

The orthogonal nature of the axes leads to the result

$$M_D = \sum_{d=0}^D C_{D,d} S_d = C_{D,0} S_0 + \sum_{d=1}^D (-1)^d \frac{C_{D,d}}{2^d} M_d \quad (\text{Eqn 3})$$

where  $C_{D,d} = \frac{D! 2^d}{(D-d)! d!}$       Note:  $C_{D,D} = 2^D$

Equation #3 is left to the reader to verify.

Some interesting facts about  $S_d$  and  $M_D$  are as follows, without proofs.

$$\lim_{d \rightarrow \infty} S_d = 0 \qquad \lim_{d \rightarrow \infty} \frac{S_d}{S_d} = 1/2 \qquad \lim_{D \rightarrow \infty} M_D \rightarrow \infty \quad (\text{Very slowly})$$

For finite  $D$ ,  $M_D$  diverges when the sum is taken in a spherical order, moving out from the origin, but when the sum is taken in a cubic order, the sum converges. Which is only logical because, of course, NaCl and similar crystals would be unstable if they crystallize as spheres, and are stable as cubes. Nature is indeed described by math and follows its laws: math is not an invention, but a *discovery*.

Of course equation #3 can be rewritten as

$$S_{D=0} \quad M_D = \sum_{d=1}^D \frac{C_{D,d}}{C_{D,0}} S_d = M_D - \sum_{d=1}^D \frac{C_{D,d}}{2^d} S_d = M_D + \sum_{d=1}^D \frac{(-1)^d C_{D,d}}{2^d} M_d \quad (\text{Eqn 4})$$

Equations #3 & #4 show that all  $S_d$ 's and  $M_D$ 's are related to each other and that they are dependent on the  $S_d$ 's and  $M_D$ 's of lower dimensionality than themselves.

But what the hell do you care? You're just a lowly poet.

Calculating the  $S_d$  s

Some simple combinatorial results can be used. If one is so inclined, to calculate  $S_d$  values,  $S_1$  is known exactly and it is  $\ln(2)$ . Trivial. To find  $S_2$ , here is a formula to use

$$S = 2^{1/2} \sum_{i=1}^n \frac{1}{a_i} + 2 \sum_{i=1}^n (1 - \epsilon_i) \sum_{j=i+1}^n \frac{1}{\sqrt{b_j^2 + b_j - a_i}} \quad (\text{eqn. 8})$$

And here is a formula for  $S_3$ .

$$S_1 = 3 \sum_{a=1}^n \frac{(1)^a}{a} + 3 \sum_{a=1}^n 1^a \sum_{b=a}^n \frac{(1)^{b-a}}{\sqrt{2b^2 + (b-a)^2}}$$

$$3 \sum_{a=1}^n \sum_{b=a}^n \frac{(1)^b}{\sqrt{b^2 + 2(b-a)^2}} + 6 \sum_{a=1}^n (1)^a \sum_{b=a+1}^n \sum_{c=b}^n \frac{1^c}{\sqrt{c^2 + c(b-c)^2 + (c-b+a)^2}}$$
(eqn. #7)

We will call the absolute value of the coefficients in front of the 1<sup>st</sup> summation  $f_1$  the 2<sup>nd</sup>  $f_2$ , etc.

$$f = \frac{3!}{3!} = 1, \quad f_1 = \frac{3!}{2!1!} = 3, \quad f_2 = \frac{3!}{1!2!} = 3, \quad \text{and} \quad f_3 = \frac{3!}{1!1!1!} = 6$$

Note that the factorials in the denominator are the coefficients of the  $a$ ,  $b$ , and  $c$  indices terms under the roots. The  $d$  value arises from the fact that in the first summation there is only one index  $a$  and it's taken  $d$  times under the root. The alternating sign within the summation can be brought outside the summation if not dependent on the index. It may also be eliminated if it is raised to an even multiple of the index. Of course the approximations above approach  $S_n$  as  $n$  approaches infinity but this is very very slow even with an extremely fast computer. For higher dimensionality  $S_n$ 's there are easily extrapolated formulas that are similar to the ones above, but they are rather long to write out on paper.

For the Madelung constant  $M_n$ , if you were to calculate the summation as a series of  $D$  dimensional cubes, the number of points would be  $(2n)^D$ . For the  $S_d$  summation the number of points would be  $n^d$ . Note that in the summations above it is the last one (the triple summation for  $d=3$ ) that requires the most calculations by far. The actual number of calculations required therefore approaches  $n^d$  (that's  $d$  factorial, not  $d$  exclamation mark), as  $n$  approaches infinity. So this cuts down the number of calculations by quite a bit! (That's an exclamation mark.)

But this is a really just a stupid exercise b/c there are much faster ways to calculate the Madeflung constant. Although damn it's fun to jump the leg of really like you were your grandma's pet noodle, Fifi playing with points in space zipping from one to the next, conquering and dividing and moving on to sew seeds of destruction across everything that exists so the faster ways are boring and no challenge when you take them. Which is better a virgin or a slut? The slut's more fun but the virgin's quite an accomplishment you dirty old fucking mathematical pervert, you. 'FASTER FASTER' OH GOD! YEASSSSSSSS!!!! And all you do is spew your product onto paper till make safe sex never risking anything like emotion or disease and can you be blamed? Numbers never lie. Numbers never lie. Numbers never lie n bed together. Must be lonely lying a number (not just 1) infinitely farther apart from each other the closer you look unless crushed together in hyperspatial love-orgies on acid collectively combined and trying to cross unimaginable barriers and chasms of fear finding on the internet.

$$M_3 = 12\pi \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} \operatorname{sech} \left[ \frac{\pi}{2} \sqrt{(2n-1)^2 + (2n-1)^2} \right] = 1.747564594633822 \quad \text{And there you are}$$

Happy now

<Knock knock, knock >

"Uuunngh, go away"

<Knock knock, knock > "Police!" They pound on the door so loud that they may as well be pounding on your head with their nightsticks.

You get out of bed and some shorts on "Um, hi. Somthin' Wrong?" you answer the door with your best sick/hangover voice

"I'm Officer Anders, this is Officer Nichols. We just need to ask you some questions. Is that okay with you?"

"Um yeah. Okay."

"Were you at Peaches Crowley's birthday party last night at ten nineteen College Street?" he asks while the other cop just sits there taking notes and giving you dirty looks, the fat pig

"Peaches party? Um, yeah. I was there. Why? What's wrong?" you say a little more alertly

"We'll get to that in a minute. What time did you arrive at the party and what time did you leave?" He has to look at a checklist of questions to make sure he doesn't forget to ask you something vital

Shit, this is boring. Hmm. Let's see. What the hell is Planck's constant? "Got there a little after ten and left a little after three. This kid Dan took me home."

"And you've been here since then?"

Six point six two six times ten to the negative thirty-four Joule-seconds. "Yeah. Why? What's going on?" And how many decimal places can we count pi out to?

"In a minute. You were aware there were minors drinking?"

Three point one four one five nine. Shit, that's all you remember. "Um, yeah, but most of the alcohol was here when I showed up. Jesus! Did someone get in a wreck?" And how about e?

"No, but if they did you'd be accountable. We picked up a drunk minor driving home last night, but, lucky for you, that was before you bought the beer. Right?" he tries to get you to confess

Two point seven one eight two eight one eight two eight four five nine. Good enough. "Um, I don't think I should say anything about it, but I did try to make sure nobody drove home drunk when I was there." And the elementary charge?

"Well, wasn't that thoughtful of you? Contributing to the delinquency of minors carries up to five years in prison."

One point six oh two times ten to the negative nineteen Coulombs. Okay, the cops are playing tough, better look ashamed, worried, and at the ground. "Yeah, I know. Am I under arrest?" And let's try the gas constant

"No, at least not right now. Do you have a car?"

Eight point three one four Joules per mole Kelvin. "No, just a bike." Hnnnnn. Oh, yeah. Avogadro's number

"Did you ride it last night?"

Six point oh two two times ten to the twenty-third per mole. "Yeah. Shit. My bike's not stolen?" Oh, enough of this shit already!

"No, but..."

"Good, so what's this?"

"Hold on. You said you were brought home last night and you rode your bike?"

"Yeah, my bike's over at Peaches' in his back yard. Damn it, tell me what the hell's gon' on!" No one takes that tone with cops when they're guilty, you sly dog, you.

"A girl was raped."

"What?! Who? A girl from the party?" "Shit! Who was it?"

"We can't give out any information. Would you be willing to take a blood test?"

"Well, yeah. I didn't do it. I'll give fingerprints and a lie detector test too, if that'll help. Shit! I got to talk to Peaches."

"Bad idea, he's not taking it too well."

"Well, I got to get my bike."

"Okay, get dressed, we're going over there."

It's only nine a.m. and quite a few morose people are sitting outside, many still hungover from the night before. Police comb the ground for evidence. The tracks they left in the dew on the grass tell you they're leaving no stone unturned. But that's quite alright, you didn't leave anything under any stones.

"Can somebody tell me what happened, the cops wouldn't say exactly?" you ask, obviously exhausted and exasperated.

"Rape," Peaches' uncle mutters from between his hands as he rubs his temples with his fingers.

"I know, but who? When did it happen?"

"Allison. Last night about three thirty."

"Jesus. Is she alright?"

"She'll live, though she may not want to."

"Where is she?"

"At the hospital. Peaches too. He's taking it worse than she is. Look, I don't want to talk right now."

"Yeah, okay, call me if there's anything you need."

"Alright, thanks."

One of the kids, Rob, gets up and hands you a piece of paper. "Here's my number, call me later, maybe we can figure out what happened."

"Yeah, okay. Say, man, can you take me and my bike home in your pickup? I'm really feelin' like shit after last night."

"Who's it?" No, man, I really can't—the cops want to ask us all a bunch of questions," he says nodding toward two of the cops that are listening.

"Crap. Okay," you say disappointed. Resigned to the fact you'll have to sit through a long interrogation, you ask the cops, "Do you need me to stick around?"

"Yeah, but come on inside, why don'tcha. We need to question everyone individually. We got some coffee inside, if that'll help your hangover." Coffee is the only thing you have in common with cops.

"Coffee?" "Your eyes right up." "Yeah, that'll help." There is a God.

So after an hour of police inquisition, pathetic mind games, and stale coffee, you bike home. God, what a great day to be alive. You haven't had this much excitement since spray painting huge graffiti murals with your buddies back in high school. There's nothing quite like running rings around the cops to make life worth living. But you're not out of this yet. The cops won't find any fingerprints, blood, or even hair (Amy likes you shaved—yes, down there), and the clothes were all destroyed. The only evidence



there can be is semen, and most of that went down her throat (only to shortly come back up). Ha ha ha. God, that was gross.

A few clouds float lazily in the sky. The birds and squirrels are busy chasing each other around. That gives you the idea to call Amy later and ask her to move in with you. It's the only way you'll get her back. The bike ride home wakes you up after a long, hard night. All the way there you sing to yourself: "Happy Birthday to Peaches."

Jeff, Shauna, and René stare out the window of the tiny graduate student office where you work (sort of). They're watching the murder scene across the street with morbid fascination as the cops clean up the area. God, people are so stupid.

"I don't see why anybody'd rob that crummy little place. Oh, wow! They're carryin' out another body. Cool!" Jeff always was a sick fucker.

You stand up, knocking over a pile of papers on your desk, look out the window, say "Yep. Too bad, so sad," and sit back down thinking whoever got killed probably had it easy compared to what you've got coming if the cops find out it was you that raped Allison. But that was two-and-a-half weeks ago. You gave a blood sample and took a lie detector test (which you passed easily). You would have heard something by now if you were suspected. Shit, that whole escapade was stupid. Oh, but so much fun.

"God, you're sick!" René gripes.

"Yeah, well, I'm not the one staring out the window, now am I?" you snap back. Worthless petty squabbles like these always break out in the office. These eggheads think they're so cool when they say shit like that. You add, "I'd appreciate it if you guys could hold it down for once so I can get some work done."

"Well if..." Shauna starts in.

"Goddamn it! Don't give me your 'well ifs!' If you want to watch gore then go stand over across the street and watch it, or go rent a horror film. **Just leave me the hell alone!**" Christ, you're getting stressed out. What the hell caused you to say that? Could it be all the work you're doing on the XRM coffee plant, the teaching two chemistry lab classes, the spectroscopy battery research, the classes you're taking, wondering if the cops will figure out you raped Peaches' girl? Maybe all of the above? Could be.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to snap like that," you apologize just to keep the peace.

"Shit, I gotta get somethin' to eat before I fall over." Besides, you've got a lunch date with Amy.

The heavily salted five-grain bagel is a mysterious creation whose ingredients are known only to the lunatic, raving hippie baker who has worked at the NYC Bagelry for as long as anyone can remember. You really don't want to know what's in it. You do? No, you can't be serious. Really? Well, okay. You asked for it. Besides, all natural sea salt (and lots of it), the five "grains" it is made with are: (one) wheat, (two) finely chopped hemp seed, (three) dehydrated organically grown mushroom stems, (four) termite larva that have been dried and powdered, and (five) fresh, ground up tongues from the South American blue-tongued tree frog. They are believed to be extinct, but secretly thrive in the old hippie baker's basement nursery, raised for the psychedelic properties of the glands found in their bright blue tongues. The glands are removed before baking, which unfortunately destroys most of the hue color and psychoactive

properties. Sure the five-grain bagel might cost a little more, but heavens, what a fantastic flavor!

Besides bagels, the NYC Bagelry also sells tie-dye shirts, hemp jewelry, beads, incense, herb tea, and everlasting harmony with the Mother Earth Spirit.

"What I you have, man?" this young kid with an unkempt beard, Grateful Dead T-shirt, and ratty white-boy-dread locks tucked up in a large crocheted hat asks you.

"Ham and Swiss," you order "on a five-grain... no, on second thought, just on a regular wheat bagel."

"Meat's bad for you, man! you should, like, try the veg."

"And a small coffee."

"Man, you need an herbal tea, dude. Y'know I ke, it'll help your aura. It's a lfu er messed up."

"Coffee!"

You're half finished by the time Amy shows up. She sits down as you're wrapping up the rest of your sandwich to take with you. She looks awfully cute in her black silky dancing leotards and you love the way it fits her tits and squeezes them together as they glisten with a slight sheen of sweat. So do all the other guys in the place.

"Hey. You already ate?" "Couldn't you wait for me to get here, you pig?" Amy complains as she lightly punches your arm.

"Squeeee, squeeee, oink, oink."

"Ha, ha. Very funny, you jerk." She sits down.

"I'll wait for you to eat. I'm getting a refill anyway."

"You and your Goddamn coffee! It'll kill you some day."

"Not as fast as your Goddamn cigarettes."

You both laugh and kiss long and hard.

"Thanks for reminding me." She pulls out a new pack and, like she was trying to kill the poor thing, bangs it in the palm of her hand to pack the tobacco, unwraps it, takes one out, and lights up. "I've got all my stuff moved into the apartment. Oh! I almost forgot. I've got some really bad news."

"Joy. Let's hear it," you roll your eyes.

"You saw that murder down the street?"

"Yeah."

"It was your friend, Peaches."

"**What?!** Who the hell would kill him?"

"Well, he was the one who killed first. He shot a guy in the head, point blank, and then this lady who was with the guy killed Peaches."

"Oh, shit. That poor bastard, he couldn't deal with Allison getting raped, that's what it was. I talked to him about a week after it happened, he really felt responsible. Not to mention he looked like shit. Hey. Maybe he found out who did it and killed the son of a bitch."

"Maybe, but I doubt it—the cops couldn't even figure out who did it, no evidence."

"That's impossible! How do you know that?"

"My dad knows people in the police department. They were talking about it the other night when I was over at his house. Get this: the only evidence was the rapist's

sperm, but it was mixed with her puke and useless as evidence " Half the people in the place gag. She never was terribly tactful.

"Uuuuggghh! Shut up! I don't want to hear this."

"Oh, sorry. But the cops said the rapist didn't leave a clue."

"Man, this really sucks. Peaches was gonna be a great musician someday." You rub your eyes with your head tucked down, faking grief.

The hippie comes over with Amy's order and leans over the table, a few of his long, tangled dreads falling out of his hat, almost getting in her sandwich. "Here you go, five-grain bagel with cream cheese and herbal tea. You know, like, cream cheese is really fattening."

"Do I look fat?!" Amy cracks back.

"No, I just."

"Good! Now quit trying to make the customers not eat what you serve them and leave us the hell alone."

"Sorry."

Oh, Amy can really be great when she tries.

You get up and say chuckling, "That was great, hon. I'll be back in a minute."

<Smooch>

<Zip. Tinkie, tinkie, tinkie. Shake, shake, shake. Zip. Flush> Shut no new jokes on the wall. Just fags' phone numbers. No, wait—here's one. If you shake more than twice you're playing with it. Ha ha. Hand wash, comb, comb. Ahhh, man, it feels good to know you're free and clear. Too bad about ol' Peaches, though. Oh well, he was just a musician. Plenty more where he came from. It's not like he was a scientist or anything. Oh yeah, that reminds you, you've got to go check up on the XRM plant. Hmm. What to tell Amy? Oh, of course.

"Hey, Amy, I'm gonna go, this shit about Peaches has really got me down."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'll see you tonight."

"Yeah." <Smooch, smooch> "Bye."

"Bye." She takes another bite of her bagel.

"Hey," you say with a surprised look on your face.

"Whaa?" she mumbles through her bagel.

"Open your mouth."

She spits out her bite of five-grain bagel into a napkin. "Why?"

"Just do it."

"Aaahhaaaaaaa."

"Weird."

"What?"

"Oh, nothing."

"What is it, damn it?"

"For a second there I just thought your tongue looked bright blue."

"You really need a vacation."

"Yeah, no kiddin'. See ya."

"See ya."

<Smoooooch>

<Smoooooooch>

It's time to take the trip, to rip  
a hole in the atmosphere where  
all things make sense and nothing is possible  
Bags packed. Legs back and forth fifth sixth  
*Infinit eth?*

Whna? Where did all those monkeys come from?  
And why do they want to take out a copyright  
on the script for *Romeo and Juliet*?  
IBM typewriters falling from the sky  
@ 9<sup>th</sup> km/h

Clogging up the solar system?

Lm Yes, it is, but it makes a really cool light show



'Fucking Goddamn It to motherfucking hell'!!!' Another one of your chemistry experiments ruined by water. 'Shit!' If only these fucking stupid polymer battery compounds weren't so goddamned water sensitive. Oh well fuck it, might as well shut off all the lab equipment and go home. **"Mother fucking bitch whore slut!"**

The intensity of your yelling causes a molecule in one of the hundreds of reaction flasks in the lab to vibrate at an unusual frequency. As it does so, its sporadic random motion causes it to react with the solvent it's suspended in. The resulting product is an odd spiral-shaped molecule with the bizarre ability to replicate itself. Within the seemingly endless possible mutations that the molecule and its offspring will undergo is the genetic makeup for the most benevolent intelligent beings the universe will ever know. These wonderful, immortal god-like creatures will be so powerful that they will have the ability to eliminate all suffering and pain with which they come into contact. But that won't help you now.

Christ, though, it'd be great just to get one lousy stinkin' IR spectrum of a calcium polymer mixture without the O-H peaks from water. Where the hell's this Goddamned water coming from? You mixed this shit in the nitrogen gas dry glove box. Awwwww fuck it, let's go home before the fucking sun comes up. God, it'd be nice to get this research over and done with so you can get home at a decent hour and fuck Amy at least once a week. She sure ain't liking this shit either, that fucking horny dancer nympho bitch. And, man, you're more out of shape now than you've ever been. Oh well, no time for exercise when you're tryin' to get a Ph.D.

Okay, okay, get the lab cleaned up, put the shit back in the drawer. One good thing about coming in at night: at least you don't have to put up with those bunch of asshole geek coworkers of yours. Bunch of fuck'n nerds. Okay, okay, turn off the vacuum pump to the glove box, clean off the silver bromide IR transparent sample holders, shut off the IR computer. Make a few entries in your lab book. Done.

<Knock knock knock >

Shit. What now? **Go 'way! I'm busy!** Who the hell is it at four in the morning?

<Knock knock knock > **Police! Open up!**

Great. Campus cops. What the hell do they want? Oh, of course. Scott, the asshole short fat ratfink Jesus-freak janitor called in another complaint.

'Yeah, sorry I was busy. What can I help you with?' As if you didn't know.

'We had a complaint that there was a lot of swearing coming from this lab. Is that true?' Oh sure, he wants you to admit it. Is he so stupid that he thinks you're that stupid? He looks like he's from Hawaii, the fat pig. Hmmmm. Naw, he'd probably make a lousy po. But the little female cop with the long curly blonde hair looks like she'd make a great lei. They both step on into the lab with that arrogant display of authority that only cops can exude. Man, oh man, but you wouldn't mind playin' cops n' robbers with the little bitch minus the handcuffs, thanks.

No. I wasn't swearing. I had the radio up loud so I could hear it over the vacuum pump. That's probably what someone heard. Who was it? As if you didn't know.

Right. Do you even have a radio in here? Cause I don't hear one playin'.

'Look, it's right over there by the DSC.' Let's fuck with their heads a bit.

The what?

'Oh, sorry. Differential scanning calorimeter. Look, I turned off the music cause I'm on my way out. Okay?' You smile, knowing that he knows you're lying. And that he knows that you know that he knows you're lying. And so on.

Fine. But if I find out you're being offensive I'll slap you with a racket. Even though it's four in the morning, there are still people working in the building—respectable people who don't like to hear foul language. Got it?" He smiles back knowing that you know that he knows. Oh fuck it.

*Respectable?* Ha. He obviously doesn't know Scott. About the only words that freak ever says are "Jesus loves you" or "You'll burn in Hell." (If you let him know you're not Christian.) Never a "Hi, how's it goin'?" or "Great football game last weekend." No anything that's not "of God," he won't touch with a ten-foot broom. People just learn to ignore his hateful comments and get on with what they're doing. You think back to the time when he said "Jesus loves you" and you replied "Yeah, well you tell Jesus it'll cost him fifty bucks—the same as it does for everyone else." Shut the fuck up, man, you're dealing with cops.

Yeah, yeah, okay. **SHIT! Watch it!** Oh Goddamn it. Look at what the hell you've done! **You idiot!!**

The female cop gasps and jumps back from the valve she just bumped into. You reach over and shut it off, though not in time to keep the trifluoroacetic acid from dripping through the glass tubing into the maze of fumes, condensers, and collection flasks. Finally it ends up in a reaction vessel, which just so happens to be the home of a certain spiral molecule. As the pH in the vessel drops, the hydronium ions saturate the odd molecule and it dissociates into fragments. Oh well, so much for a perfect universe. You stand there staring at her with a look of pure hatred and anger—a look that's not too hard for you to fake. Or is it fake?

Yes, I cussed. And I'm probably going to cuss a *hell* of a lot more! There's a good chance you just ruined a month's worth of work! You point at the door, shaking with anger but inwardly laughing. **GFT OUT!** You have no idea what was in the reaction vessel and could not care any less—it ain't your project. Ha, ha, ha, ha. The cops leave the blonde girl cop going "I'm sorry, God, I'm so sorry." The other cop just seethes under the collar but keeps his big fat porky mouth shut so hopefully you won't report this little incident and make them pay for the damage they caused.

You breathe a deep sigh of relief mixed with exhaustion, anger, and frustration. People suck, life sucks, everything sucks. You leave the lab and go in the grad student office next door to grab your leather coat, ski cap, and gloves before biking home. But then. What the hell? Let's play a game of minesweeper on the computer. So you win a few games of that really easily. Aww. Fuck it. Let's surf the net. Hmm. Here's a new address you've been wanting to try: <http://www.bizarro.com/sick/porn>. A guy sucking his own dick—yuck, boring. A chick getting fucked by a donkey—yeah, yeah, ho hum. A masturbating hermaph. A dude with two dicks, each getting a blow from a porno whore—old stuff. Hmm. Nothing odd about this one. The photo slowly loads onto the screen from top to bottom. Bleach blonde bimbo with a shitty makeup job. Plastered up zits and silicon tits. Legs spread wide open like an illustration for a gynecology journal. Wait a minute. What the f—

**AAAAAGHHH!!!! That is SICK!** That's the most fucked-up, disgusting thing you've ever seen in your entire life. A chick taking a shit in a guy's mouth. Now that's the epitome of gross! You print out a copy on the color inkjet printer, being careful not to get your fingerprints on it. "This will be perfect!" This ought to freak that Jesus-freak asshole janitor Scott right out. Oh well, that's what the short little dork gets for calling the pigg. Who the hell does he think he is? Jesus fucking Christ, can't a man even get pissed off and yell at the world anymore without getting hassled? This'll show that low-life retard freak not to mess with you.

You find some normal porno pics and surf through them real quick. There's one series of a really hot Asian babe. Should you jerk off real quick? Naw fuck it. It's getting late. You do have to be at work by ten tomorrow morning, don't forget. Shit! Oh well.

So you lock up the lab and office and try to find a good place to put the shit muncher photo. Hmm... the janitor's closet? Perfect. You can hear him singing some cheesy Jesus song as he sweeps up one of the classrooms. It'll probably take the dude half an hour or more to finish. Why the hell does the government always hire rejects to do a job when it would save thousands if they'd just hire someone half way normal in the first place? Hell... it'd be even better if they'd just send all the freaks to a gas chamber the second they're born. Or flush them all down the toilet. Hei Shitler! Oh well. So anyway you pull a tack out of the hallway bulletin board that was holding up a poster for the homeless shelter food-drive and tack up the tacky porn right on the janitor's closet so Scott will be the first to see it. You take off your disposable lab gloves and stick them in your pocket. God, you'd love to see ol' Scott's face when he finds that shit muncher photo. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha.

On the way out the door you see a mop bucket filled with dirty water by the stairway steps and kick it over—icing on the cake.

It's hell biking home against the wind. And the ice on the ground sure doesn't help. A flurry of snowflakes gitters in the bright lights from the football stands. Stupid idiots should have turned them off. **"Goddamn this fucking cold weather to hell!!"** hell... hell... hell. As the echo bounces back from the stadium wall and hits you, three perfectly identical snowflakes land in your eye, making you scream yet again. In the short time it takes them to melt they form an intricate fractal pattern spiral design of ice and water with millions of shimmering colors. Too bad it's too small for you to see. If you want to try and give this universe even any meaning then be your guest. Maybe it's your lucky day. And then again, maybe not.

You get home, quickly undress, and snuggle up next to Amy to get warm. She tries to get you to fuck her. "Noooo. I'm too tired. I gotta get up early," you protest.

"Goddamn it! Fine then. See if I fix you breakfast tomorrow."

Bitch.

The sharp decaying yellow teeth on the coffee bean snap shut around you. Bad breath stench of stale cream and sugar envelops you as the bean starts chewing away like a cartoon Venus flytrap. It spits you out into the soil mutating you, pouring fertilizer all over you just as you did to it. Odd sprouts resembling electrical wires shoot out of your body and bury themselves in the earth around you, tunnelling on forever. Branches with glimmering silicon leaves shoot out the top of your head and travel farther than the stars themselves. A whole million upon millions of roasted coffee beans congratulate each other. "Job well done gentlemen." The large bean in the center puffs an after dinner cigar... then everything explodes.

"Wake up. I made you breakfast." Amy waves a hot cup of your favorite Kenyan AA under your nose. The smell alone could wake the dead. But this time... "What's wrong?" she asks perplexed by the look of terror on your face.

"Uh... nothing. Say, do we have any decaf?"

"Decaf?!!! You?!"

"Uh, yeah. I guess you're right. Just kidding." You take the cup from her like it's a live grenade. <Slurp> "Oww! That's hot."

"You want it cold?"

"Oh, don't start. It's too early. What time is it? What's for breakfast?"

"Nine thirty. Your favorite, though you don't deserve it."

"Yeah, yeah, at least I work. Now what did you fix me?"

"Jerk. Whole wheat bagel, toasted, with cream cheese, yellow onions, tomatoes, and those damned expensive imported salmon lox."

"Awwright!" You think maybe there's hope for Amy yet. Salmon lox, the tang of bacon, the flavor of fish, the texture of a ripe banana, the fruit of the ocean, the mating of a salted watermelon and a great white shark. Cream cheese extends the flavor. Tomato adds moisture and a little acidity. A thin slice of yellow onion introduces the lox to the tongue like an obnoxious co-host. Johnny Carson the lox. Ed McMahon the onion. And a toasted wheat bagel keeps it all together and gives you something to chew on. Amy's really trying hard. So you try to be nice to her for a rare brief moment, "Hey, I'm really sorry I've been busy lately. I'll try and get home early today. Maybe this afternoon."

"Good! It's been almost a week, you asshole, and the chairman is soooo boring in bed."

"Yeah, yeah. Long as he gimme my fifty dollar tha's fine wit me. I don't give my hoes out for free, y'know."

"Asshole."

<Smooooooooooh>

"Mmmmm Mmmmm. I wouldn't give this ass away for a million bucks," you lie, fondling her butt with your arms around her. "Say, what are you havin' for breakfast?"

"Toast, bacon, and eggs."

"Yuck! That's gross!" You munch a bite of your bagel.

"Look who's talking, you slimy salmon eatin' fool."

<Smoooooooooooooooooooootch> You start to get a boner and pull her in close, thinking you might call in sick today.

"Yuck!" She jumps back. "Brush your damn teeth after eating that shit before you kiss me like that."

"Yeah, okay, okay. Sorry. Hey, now you know how I feel about cigarettes. I gotta get dressed and go to work anyway."

The sun cautiously breaks through the clouds like a burglar with a flashlight breaking into a jewelry shop. Things are slowly warming up as the crystals of cold and snow are stolen away. A warm wind comes out of the south like a fart from the gods. A few puddles have formed in the streets and you vigorously splash through them with your bike, shooting an arc of mud on either side. Life ain't so bad. You just have to get some new samples made in the lab, being extra careful to keep everything dry this time. First of course you'll have to pay a visit to your old friends, the coffee plants, part of the morning ritual.

"No," you whisper in astonished disbelief. Almost five years of intense labor, careful research, and every spare penny you had is all gone. The lock broken, the burglar alarms dismantled. Who? Only one word crosses your mind over and over. *Kill Kill Kill Kill*.

Who would dare? You catch a glimpse of a human form sneaking through the shadows.

"**You!!! You did this!**" you yell at the figure as it steps out into the light. It's the cute female cop who came to your lab last night. Damn! So much for instant vengeance.

"No. I just shut off the alarms," she says with a savagely sweet smile, the kind that could make an emperor send armies out to destroy the world. The type of smile you want to crush

with kisses, even though you know she wears poison lipstick. You've seen women like her before and learned to avoid their traps. "Let's go for a walk."

"A walk? Fuck that! Who stole all my plants and equipment?" Then as you stare at the empty greenhouse you suddenly realize your mistake. Scott. Maybe that shit muncher printout trick was a bit too twisted.

"I've been waiting for you and we're going for a walk. Now. Follow me."

Jesus H. Christ. You haven't seen a look that vicious in a long time. And on a girl? Even if she is a cop. Crazy.

"Not if you tell me where we're going," you insist.

"We're going to see an old friend of yours," she growls through clenched teeth like a garbage disposal with a bad case of indigestion from eating too many spoons.

Yep. Scott. Shit, that was a stupid prank you pulled last night. Oh well. Let's get this confrontation over with. You'll have to lie better than you ever have before.

So, all the while admiring her ass, you follow her down the stairs, out the chemistry building, and over to

"The administration building? Why here?" you ask.

"I don't ask questions, asshole. I just follow orders."

"Like a good little robot cop." Don't let her see your fear, man.

"You'll pay for that, asshole," she growls that awful growl again. Man, could she use a few lessons.

And so you follow her on into The president's office? What the hell?

"Anhhhh. Greetings. Greetings, my young friend. How are you? Doing well, I trust. Or certainly better than your stupid coffee plants," the fat president says as he wraps his left arm around your shoulder and pushes you into one of the oak and leather chairs in front of his desk. The fat man isn't so fat anymore, and seems bigger about the chest and arms. Been exercising. Like you need to be doing.

"What do you start to speak."

"What do I want with you?" he cuts you off short. "Isn't it obvious, or are you so stupid that you can't figure out that I'm no longer concerned with your little videotape threat?"

The girl cop tries to contain her laughter as she picks up and fondles a Chinese ivory carving off one of the shelves.

"You realize I'll tell."

"Tell who? The EPA? No concern of mine, you little imbecile, or at least not any longer. You see, it wasn't I who dumped the waste, it was those graduate students following the instructions of the chemistry department chair, Dr. Weirgrave. Well, Dr. Weirgrave just happens to be a friend and I didn't want to see either he or his students in jail, so I played along with your little game. And now I have something to show you. Ta daaaa." Like a wannabe magician he lifts a silk handkerchief that was covering three familiar looking videotapes on his desk. You stare at them stupefied.

"How... how..." you stammer.

"HOW?! Ha ha ha ha ha.. hrrm. Never trust lawyers. Did you think your lawyers wouldn't watch the tapes themselves and see the potential for easy cash. The first one I've had for four years now, only cost me two thousand dollars. The second was brought to me a week ago, cost five thousand. The third was taken from your apartment two days ago, cost me nothing." The girl cop blows on her nails and rubs them on her uniform. He throws the erased tapes into your lap one at a time. "Now you listen to me, you little shit, if you mention this to



anyone, you're dead. I'm going to be announcing that I'll be running for senator soon and I don't need a stain like this on my reputation."

"Okay. Can I go now?" you ask, gently setting the blank tapes back on his desk.

"No!! You may go when I say. These, I believe, are yours. You never came to pick them up from me." He hands you a huge stack of papers.

You read the titles and realize you're dealing with a man who's gone over the edge. The edge of what, who knows, but he's gone over it.

Paper one: *Beavis and Butt-head: Its significance in the influence of modern teenage culture.* Paper two: *Beavis and Butt-head: The psychological impact of Butt-head's domineering role on Beavis' creativity.* Paper three: *Beavis and Butt-head: Is Stewart a close, homosexual?* Paper fifty-six: *Beavis and Butt-head: Huh, huh, huh. That was cool!*

You stare up with a look of stark terror on your face as he takes a piece of coffee candy out of his crystal candy holder and tucks it in your coat pocket.

"But where are all the coffee pants?" you dare to ask.

"You're a bigger fool than I thought. You should be more worried about yourself right now, but if you must know, take a look." He points to the fireplace. "That's just one of them, of course. The rest have been placed in a limb shredder early this morning. You may go now. Take the tapes and papers with you, and thank you for enlightening me about the culture of *Beavis and Butt-head*. Huh, huh, huh, huh. That was cool."

You hurry, grab the tapes and papers, and start to rush for the door. The girl cop barricades the path.

"Not so fast. He and I have something to straighten out. Do you mind?" she asks the president.

"Not at all. Just be careful of the antiques is all I ask."

"I just want you to know," she says with a wry grin. "I truly am terribly sorry about that accident with your chemistry experiment last night. Perhaps this will make up for it."

Your midsection gives way and you buckle over gasping for air. You haven't seen a kick that fast in a long time. You're faster, but then it's been awhile. It would be so easy to take her out. But you'd never get away with it, ten more cops would surround the place in minutes. Best just to take a little pain and get out while the getting's good. He who runs away lives to fight another day.

In the cabinet against the wall, you see the little figurine statue of the samurai warriors in a duel that caught your eye so many years ago. One is poised over the other, ready to deliver the death stroke. It seems obvious who the victor is. However, as you look a little closer, you see the vanquished warrior's knife is drawn and ready to be thrown. Not typical samurai chivalry, but not a typical sculpture either.

You briefly glance back at the president. He laughs saying, "She'll make an excellent bodyguard for a senator, don't you think?"

As you wipe the sweat off your brow the president sneers at you and says, "Tilt."

Jesus! Coincidence. Must be. You say nothing and pick up the tapes and papers, struggle to your feet, and walk out the door with what little dignity you can muster all the while thinking, "They die. They die. They die."

Outside you set the stack of *Beavis and Butt-head* reports on a trashcan and the crased tapes and candy right next to them. As you walk away a strong north wind picks up and scatters the papers all over the university grounds. So much for a warm day.

Back at the office you sit and ponder. What to do about the research? How to kill the president and that bitch cop? And what the hell happened to Scott's shit muncher principal? And how many farts does it take to equal the Big Bang? And just where did God get all those beans from in the first place?

You stare over at Xiao-len, the Chinese graduate student working at the computer. She's manipulating her Raman spectra (graphs) to remove unwanted laser lines/peaks. She's not really changing her data, she's just removing instrumental background interference. Hmmmm. Of course. How simple: use the computer to change your spectra to give the results you're after. Simply remove the unwanted water bands from your spectra. Perfect. On the table you see the newspaper headlines. 'Unbomber Captured'. Hmmmm. Maybe Explosives are easy to make, hard to trace, and leave little evidence. So be it. That will take care of the president. But what the hell happened to that stupid turd-muncher pig? Fuck it. Who cares?

"Xiao-len, if anyone asks for me, tell them I was sick and went home."

"Oh, okay. I sorry you not feel good. I see you tomorrow."

On your way out the door you see Shauna coming in.

"I saw your greenhouse got dismantled this morning. Didn't you even want to keep anything from it?" she asks sarcastically. She always did make fun of your hobby.

You push past her, saying in a low tone so no one else will hear: "Cunt."

Outside the building you take a deep breath of cold winter air to wake you up. You half expect to see a posse of cowboys armed with laser guns, dressed in drag, flying down out of the sky at you, riding fire-breathing chihuahuas. Jeez, it's been a weird fucking day.

"Why are you home so early?" Amy asks.

"Bad day. Don't ask, you tell her and start stacking weights on the barbell."

"Research that bad, huh?" she won't quit until you get out of the way.

"Sort of. Greenhouse had to be dismantled. Grant money ran out. Plants all destroyed to make way for a new chem lab. You've always told everyone the greenhouse was funded by a research grant from a large coffee firm. Bastards didn't even warn me!"

"Oh, I'm sorry, hon. God, that thing meant a lot to you, didn't it?"

"Duh."

"Oh, come on, don't start on me. Look, you want a back-rub?"

"No. I want blood. Now, just stay out of my way and let me workout," you growl.

"Jesus. You're really pissed. Hmmmm. I know what you need," she purrs in her most seductive voice as she twirls her fingers in your chest hair. It sort of works: your mood softens.

"Thanks, hon," you say smiling and kiss her, "but just make me some coffee for now. I'll be alright."

As you hear the ever-familiar coffee brewing sounds in the kitchen you take the sword from its holder on the shelf and remove the peg holding the handle to the blade. Inside the hollow handle is a small plastic bag. You let out a deep sigh of relief. Five of the XRM coffee beans, unroasted, fertile, ready to conquer the world. And you have many more at your mother's house for safekeeping. You replace them and set the sword back on the shelf before Amy comes in: she gets mad when you practice with the sword in the apartment.

"Here you go. I hope you don't mind, but I thought you'd like it if I used some of the coffee from that plant you made."

"Oh, hon, you are too beautiful. <Slurrrrp> I swear you must be a mind reader. Don't use any more though, I'll need samples for trying to sell it. Don't tell a soul, but I've got a backup plan."

"You were always so smart. I'm gonna workout too. Mind?"

"Uuhhh. I didn't realize you could bench one eighty-five," you tease her.

"No, silly. aerobics with the light dumbbells."

"Oohhhh. Go ahead. Why the hell not? It'll be good to have something to watch."

You lie back on the bench and position your hands on the bar. Feels heavier than usual. It's been a few weeks. Raise it up, lower, touch chest, raise, lower, raise, twelve reps. "Whew!" Breathing comes difficult. Christ. First set already tired. <Slurrrrp> Ouch. Not bad. Not the best coffee in the world, but not half bad. XRM. It just might make you rich. The super-caffinated buzz hits you and with a little imagination the barbell becomes your worst enemy. Up, down, up, down. "Whew." Easier.

Amy puts on some crappy digitized, synthesized workout music and takes off her clothes. Most of them. She leaves her shorts and shoes on then starts bouncing around to the beat of the digital noise, it's going up, down, up, down. "Strt. Concentrate man. <Slurp> You grab the bar. Up, down, up, down. Ahhh. Feels good. <Slip. Gulp> "Ahhh."

Amy looks at you with a devilish grin as she raises the three-pound dumbbells over her head one at a time, making her bare perky tits jiggle up, down, up, down.

Come on, man, finish your workout. "One, two, three, twelve!" you hiss through your teeth. Done with that part. You bend down under the barbell and hoist it up onto the squat rack. Amy lies down on the bench, staring at you like a cat in heat, which she well could be. She can fuck like a wildcat. Not that you've ever fucked a wildcat. Maybe a few domestic ones. Neighbors weren't too happy about those filthy looking kittens. Ha ha ha.

"What're you smickerrin' at?" she pouts.

"Nothing, hon. Let's just finish the workout."

"Alright, but you better not be laughin' at me."

Yeah, right. And what would she do if you were? Nothing. She holds the dumbbells apart and brings them together, doing flies, making her boobs squeeze into each other. No, man, not yet. Work up to it. Build the passion like steam in a pressure cooker. Four sets of twenty squats with two fifteen, watching Amy dance around. Mother of God. How does she bend like that? Sweat beads pop out on your chest and brow. Amy impatiently ogles you while doing her leg raises and sit ups. Okay, twenty five pound dumbbells. Curls, extensions, forward raises, reverse flies, shoulder presses. Each four sets of twenty four.

"Get me another coffee, hon?" you ask, panting.

"Oh yeah. You bet. She knows what that means."

"Latte. Use that new Kenyan French roast."

"No prob."

Okay, the moment we've all been dreading. Leg-lifts with the five-pound ankle weights.

"One twenty six, one twenty seven."

"Here ya go. With raw sugar."

"Ahhhh. <Slurp> Oww. Excellent. <Smoootch>."

Amy cools off with splits, hamstring stretches, and a few yoga contortionist positions. Hurts just to watch. You stare on the corner of your eye while completing the workout with leg extensions and curls. Okay, take the weights off the barbell, set them on the floor under the

bench <WHUD!> the last weight slips off the end of the metal bar and crashes to the floor in very much the same way that feathers don't. Now why is that familiar?

"Shit!" Amy screams

<Thud, thud> the downstairs neighbor bangs on the ceiling, feeling you've been stealing his piece of peace of mind from the daily grind with your clatter. Oh well, doesn't matter

"Sorry," you reply with your shut-eating grin. Hmmm. Odd—the freak who was munching the turd in Scott's photo sure wasn't grinning. You recline back on the futon, coffee in hand. "Shit, that wore me out," you fib. "Ahhh." <Slurrrrrp. Gulp. Gulp.>

"You son of a bitch," she says as you roll over, pretending to go to sleep. "You haven't spent any time with me in almost a week." She stands mouth agape, hands on hips, fuming like a noxious chemical reaction, well you should know.

"Gotcha!" You lurch up and pull her down, blowing against her belly, making tickling raspberry noises. Zerk!t sherbet.

"Goddamnit," she screams/laughs. "Oooooo. Eeee. Shit. You Asshole."

"Ha ha ha ha. Ohh yeah, baby. Dis be what I need." You slide her shorts off her and lick away at the funky fur fish, a teasing and a greasing, 'til you can't wait anymore. You nibble her nipples and neck for a minute then it's time for the ol' sheep skin rubber. Baaaaa. Mary had a little lamb. Oh yes. This is the best. Latex just don't cut it. Bare pussy sure would be nice, but no way—no babies, man. None to take care of anyway. Ha ha ha.

Missionary, doggy style, rearing back, Harvey wall-banger, etc., etc., etc.

"Mmmmm. Damn you're good," she informs you for the thousandth time, secretly wishing you'd let her smoke a GPC, but you've got her well-trained.

"Yes, I know," you smirk. "You're damn good yer own self. I'm gonna finish up my research soon, tonight I expect. We'll do this more often. But now it's back to the lab. Lots to do tonight."

"Good. Get your ass up there and finish that damn work, 'cause I could do this all day long." She's not kidding—she could. All night as well. Nympho.

"Yeah, hon. I know what you mean," you tell her, toweeling off your crotch with a dirty tee-shirt, then put your pants and clean shirt back on. "Don't wait up for me."

"Okay, see ya tomorrow."

<Smoooooooooooootch>

Alright. Down to business. What to do first? Make the explosives or fake the data? Someone might come into the lab at night and see you unethically manipulating the IR spectra. Best make the explosives first. Your key still fits the physical chemistry (p-chem) teaching lab. No one comes in here at night. You haven't been in here for about two years, thank God—teaching sucks! Another key fits the chemistry stockroom where you used to work for Jim. That idiot's since turned into a coke addict. His money will all be gone soon, along with the house, the car, and all the girls. Oh well. Like you care. It's a good thing you always make copies of keys. There's that five-pound container of hexamethylene tetramine, still on the shelf collecting dust. No one will miss it, that's for sure. Let's see. A couple of bottles of nitric acid should do the trick. They're expensive. Jim will notice they're gone. Oh well, he'll just get a surprise when he does inventory. Let's see, is that all you need? There's plenty of acetone in the p-chem lab. Oh yeah! Dry ice. Hmmm. Four pounds should do. Okay, back upstairs to

the p-chem lab. Goggles and gloves on. Weigh out the hexamethylene tetramine. In fume hood slowly add it and a magnetic Teflon-coated stir bar to the cold nitric acid. Keep it cold by placing the beaker in acetone/dry ice bath. Hold the temperature at under zero Celsius for thirty minutes. Pour acid mixture into crushed ice, just like a margarita. WOW. Shit, that's a lot of cyclotrinitethylene trinitramine, the main ingredient in C-4, four plastique explosive. You make five more batches until almost running out of nitric acid. Filter and rinse all your product with boiling distilled water. Check pH with litmus paper. Done.

Shit. No, not done. Have to make the blasting cap explosive. Fulminated mercury is easiest. Good, there's enough nitric acid left. Dissolve two grams mercury in thirty five milliliters nitric acid. Wait fifteen minutes. Slowly pour the acid/mercury into fifty milliliters of ethanol. Wow. That is a cool reaction. Color changes, toxic fumes, bubbles, precipitate forming in the beaker. Cool. The very reason why you became a chemist. Filter, rinse, and store in ethanol (it's VERY unstable when dry, it detonates if insulated). Pour toxic waste down the sink. Awww, poor widdle fishie wishes. Oh well, a little mercury never killed anyone, just gave them mad hatter's disease and made mutants of their offspring. Done. Rinse glassware. Take empty bottles and containers to dumpster so no one will see them. Alright. Over two pounds of high explosives. Life rules. No. Death rules. Yeah, much better.

Okay, back to the office to change all your IR spectra. There goes that nasty big O-H water peak at thirty eight hundred wavenumbers. Don't forget to change the dates on all the computer files. Add a few entries into your lab book to make it look like you actually did the work. Done. And only three in the morning. This kicks ass. All you have to do now is write your Ph.D. dissertation. And you can do most of the writing on the computer at home. That will suck. Many, many months coming up of wallowing around in hardcore bullshit. Get out the thigh length rubber wading boots. Well, at least the hard part's out of the way.

As you're leaving the building you see Scott finishing up sweeping the stairs. The temptation is too great and you have to speak. "Hi Scott. Have a good night, last night?" He says nothing and leers at you with a blank smile. So the asshole thinks what happened to the greenhouse is funny. Maybe he needs some ammonia in his beach water. A little chlorine gas for his Jesus-freak ass. Nah, fuck it. The retard ain't worth the trouble. Best let it be. But what the hell happened to his turn-of-the-century printout? Maybe he gave it to the cops and that's why that hot little bitch cop was so pissed off. Fuck it. Who cares?

Camera flashes pop every now and again like little super novae in a miniature universe. People walk across the stage to shake their professors' hands and then the president's. Getting close to the end of it all. The boring speech took forever. And, of course, the president had to apologize for not congratulating the graduating seniors individually, but it would make the ceremony last for several days. Ha ha ha. Very funny, fat man. You'll have a joke for him later tonight. And the guest speaker, an ex-astronaut or some such shit, had to tell us about all the endless possibilities awaiting all the graduates from the university and blah blah blah. Then the people getting their master's degrees walk the stage, then the doctoral candidates. Yaaaawwwwn. God, you hate wearing this suit. The cap and gown make it worse.

Finally you hear your name called over the PA. Your quasi-redneck family cheers and hollers as you go walk across the stage, shake your professor's fat, sweaty hand, then the president's. He hands you your Ph.D. diploma, gives you a mean look, and squeezes your hand hard. He's strong, but not terribly so. You tighten your grip slightly and pinch the large nerve in his wrist with your index fingernail. He gasps and tries to pull back without making a scene.



You pull him in close and quietly hiss in the most evil voice ever heard by human ears. "Tilt!" His face grows red. You release his hand and walk off stage smug with grim satisfaction. The casual observer may have thought you and he were acquaintances and you whispered a last farewell which, in a way, is true.

Rather than return to your seat as everyone else did, you walk out of the stadium and down a long utility corridor leading outside while removing your cap and gown. Barely audible footsteps tell you someone may be following and you duck into the bathroom, hide behind the door, and put on your ever-present lab gloves.

"Nice to see you again," you tell the blonde girl-cop. "Looking for action, or do you always hang out in the men's room?" Your voice echoes coldly in the large public bathroom.

She slowly turns around and asks, "What was that about on stage?" Haven't you learned your lesson?"

"No. I have another videotape, you see. It's in my office desk at school. It's the last copy. You'll have to get through me if you want it."

She grins and wastes no time, thrusting a roundhouse kick to your knee. Except that your knee is no longer there. In fact, you are no longer there either. You are now behind her.

"Come now, you can do better than that. What are you, a black belt?" you tease her.

She twists and throws a chop to your neck—a ruthless maneuver. It misses as you duck back and grab. Her arm snaps backwards under your return blow, destroying the ligaments in the elbow.

"Unh, unh. Naughty, naughty. Let's leave ol' nasty mister gun in his holster, hmm? Tears? Unbecoming of a warrior. The shame must be unbearable. I really am truly sorry. Perhaps this will make up for it."

A sick crunch mixes with the echoes of your voice as you grab her chin from behind, pushing her head to the opposite side and backwards. A final twist to be certain. And you set her on the john with her pants around her ankles and her radio switched off. Hmmm. Better make it look like a sex/hate crime. You shove one end of her nightstick into the toilet and the other into her tight little vagina, looking like a Helen Keller joke. Snug fit! ha ha ha ha.

Okay, okay, quit laughing. Latch the stall door, slide under. She shouldn't have been so stupid to follow you in alone without any backup. C'est la vie. No, wait a minute. C'est la morte. Yeah, that's better. It's really weird the way these great opportunities suddenly arise. You couldn't have planned it better yourself. A little death never killed anyone.

And yet another graduation dinner at the Chinese restaurant as you try to block out the dull conversation and obnoxious whiny music. Amy and the family. Grandparents couldn't make this one, getting too old to make the trip from Florida. You might go see them on the way back from Brazil when you try to sell your XRM coffee beans. One of the plantations even paid for your ticket and accommodations. Amy won't shut up about how she wants to get married soon. Of course your parents are on her side. And she has to go on bragging about how you're now a doctor of physical chemistry.

"He studies all the time. He's my little work-o-holic. And he still finds time to workout about two or three hours a day. It's like he's possessed. Yes, Amy, quite right, possessed with hate."

You'd like to make a smart-arsed comment about her being a rest-o-holic. No, man, just get the day over with. There's a lot still to do. You've got to get Amy on the plane to New York in a few hours so she can audition for Broadway. You know she won't make it, but at

least it will get her out of town while you take care of the president before heading to Brazil. God, you can't wait, the coffee capital of the world, what a party that'll be.

"Haven't you been offered any jobs yet?" your dad asks.

"Well, every place I've sent a resume has turned me down. Overqualified, underqualified, not hiring, same old story. Something will turn up soon." The simple truth, you suspect, is that Dr. Feckstein isn't putting in good recommendations for you. He probably knows about that toxic waste blackmail scam. Even if he doesn't, the president and chemistry chair surely must have told him not to give you a good recommendation. Christ, even the junior colleges turned you down. Well, you'll just have to find some way to fix that.

The waiter comes over and takes everyone's order.

"What's good here, hon?" Amy asks. "Why's she asking you?" You and she have entirely different tastes.

"Well, you probably won't like what I like, but everyone loves the soup," you suggest.

"I'll try it. As long as it's not too filling."

Now's the moment we've all been waiting for. The duffel bag strap pulls down on your shoulder, weighted by the section of six-inch diameter pipe stuffed with explosives and BBs for shrapnel. Three a.m. No one around to see. You dart up to the president's house and pull off the door to the crawlspace underneath. It's a tough scramble in the cramped, dark space, dodging water pipes and beams. Oh well, it'll be worth it. Yeah, this is about where the front door is. Cool, let's do it. You wedge the bomb in between some wooden beams and poke the fuse into the lit cigarette, just above the butt. At least there's one thing cigarettes are good for. Should give you about eight minutes to get away.

Back outside, across the street, three minutes to go. Shotgun ready. <CRASH!> The ball-bearing shatters the president's front picture window. Perfect. Practice pays off. A light comes on in the house. And another right by the front window where the bomb is, you'd guess. Loud clanging flies out of the window with a moan as much force as the ball-bearing that flew in. Best get out of here. Sirens wail in the distance, getting nearer. He called the cops. You run back to the chemistry building. Thirty seconds left, or about. Zero seconds. Shit. Come on, come on, baby, blow. Twenty seconds after still no boom. Cops pulling up, getting out. Shit, shit, shit. Forty seconds after. Goddamn it. Cigarette must've gone. Whoa. Huge flash. <KRAA-BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM boom> "Yes!"

So you head upstairs to the office to finish packing. Ren and Stimpy calendar, floppy disks, stapler, more damn chemistry books than a sane man needs, etc., etc. Beautiful day, couldn't be better—two deaths, maybe more. It's been way too long. You haven't had this much fun since that semi-bal mugger jumped you in that alley back home. You almost wish something like this would happen every day. Death makes life worth living. When it's someone else's, that is. Ha ha ha ha ha.

Finally, the last box of stuff to pack up from the office. Oh God! No! You pull the book off the shelf: *Quantum Chemistry*. That class sucked like nothing has ever sucked before—even that psycho moron slat Khara, from five years back. What to do with all your samples in the lab? Probably ought to destroy them so no one runs any tests and finds out they're all bogus.

Hmm. Lights on in the lab. Odd. Who could be here this late? You peek through the window in the door. Well, well. Life is too crazy. Scott's in the lab. Janitors aren't supposed to be in here (so much dangerous stuff around). Now what the fuck is he doing? Making drugs? No, entirely too stupid for that. Stealing chemicals or equipment? Could be. No.

Wait, he's in your sample drawer. What the fuck? ' Son of a bitch! ' It was him, the fat little bastard, all this time. All those nights spent trying to figure out what went wrong and it was this little fucking saboteur the whole time. Sure as shit (though how shit could be sure of anything is beyond your comprehension), there he goes, dropping water on your samples. Motherfucker! He dies, that's all there is to it, he. No—fuck it. He did you a favor in the long run. And you've been pushing your luck lately. Let's drop it. Maybe some other day we'll come back and waste him. And, then again, maybe not.

So school's finally over and done with. Twenty years spent in the education system, most of it a waste. Everyone thinks the president's death was a political killing. And the cop's death some kind of heinous sex/hair crime, possibly connected to the president's death, but no one's certain. Hmm. No, better that you didn't rape her. Would've taken too long. Would've been fun, but definitely not worth the risk. Not in a public bathroom in a crowded building. Even if the bathroom was in a seldom-used corridor. She wasn't even found till late that night, all stiff with rigor mortis, her own nightstick making her a cop ol' pop. Anyway, it's all over now. Best head back to the lab/office for the final good-byes to everyone.

As you round the corner in the hall and head toward your ex-office your heart, what little of it there is, leaps into your throat and you quickly duck back. Shit! No! Damn. What are all those cops doing at your office? Goddamn it! They know about the bomb. That must be it. What else could it be? Jeff runs down the hall toward you, presumably to grab you before the cops can. Everybody wants to be a hero.

"Jeff! What's going on, man? Why are all those cops down the hall?" you play ignorant.

"Outta my way, man. I'm gonna be sick." Scott, the janitor, <wulff> just killed himself <gruff> **Look out!** He lunges for the hallway trashcan. So that's what he was running for. Most of it goes in. <Hrowwllph> Splatter splatter > Oh shut, man. <Spit, spitoo> It's too gross for words.

"Well, at least he won't have to clean up your puke," you grin like the Cheshire cat on cocaine in a catnip patch, more from relief than laughter.

"Shut up. It's not funny. Don't go down there, man. You don't wanna see that."

"Well, I've gotta make sure I didn't leave anything behind. I'm sure it's not half as bad as you say, wussy." you taunt him.

"**Fuck you, you cold-hearted fuck!**" he yells and walks away. Good riddance. To him and Scott. Ha ha ha ha.

"**Hey! What do you want back here?**" a cop yells, barring the way to the grad student office as you try to pass.

"Uh, I, like, I work 'back here.'" You point down the hall.

"Okay, as long as you're not another damn reporter, you can pass. Just stay out of the way and don't look. It's pretty gory."

"Yeah, alright."

As you pass by you can't help but stand and stare into the janitor's closet as the cops photograph Scott's dead, bloody body slouched over a mop bucket with his wrists slit, his pants down around his ankles, and his little dork poking out from under his fat belly. His left hand holds a crucifix, his right a crumpled-up faniliar co or porno printout. A puddle of fresh blood spreads out several feet from the closet door. Amazing. Even you couldn't have done a better job, you muse with your jaw hanging open.

"Hey! Move along, you!" "This isn't a side show!" several cops yell

In the office Shauna sits crying a lake into René and Xiao-ten's arms "It's not my <sob> fault <Boo hoo boo hoo> I didn't know what he was <waaahh> doing in there when I <boo hoo hoo> opened the door <Sob boo hoo> I just heard weird noises. <Sniffle, blow honk> Thought I should've <waaahhh> looked "

"We know we know it's not your fault. You didn't do anything wrong," they console her with hugs, back pats, and "there there's

"You walk out without a word. God, this is too much! How much more fucked-up can life get? Kind of ironic though. Especially with Shauna having been in *Playpen's* college slut issue. What the hell did she think men did with porn, just look?" That shit-muncher photo probably blew her little mind right out of the water. Fuck'n waaahh. God, though Scott must've been a sicker bastard than anyone you've ever met to get off on that gross perversion.

"Oh well. So much for saying goodbyes to everyone. No one like either you or Jey care. Anyway, time to deal with your professor, the evil Dr. Frenckenstein one last time.

"Hi, Doctor Feckstein. How're you today?" you ask, squinting at the ght glaring off his shiny bald head as you enter his office.

"Can't you knock? Come in. Have a seat. How the hell do you think I am with people dying left and right? You probably don't care though, do you?" Okay, the geek's stressed out. Let's cool him down.

"Ha. Ha. Real funny. I care, but what do you want me to do about it? I'm not God. You want me to bring back the dead? Look, I see everyone's freaked out right now. I just wanted to talk about my job recommendations. You're not giving me good ones and I don't appreciate it. I mean, you've got no reason to do this to me."

"Yes, well, I'm still a bit skeptical of your research results, though they seem fine on paper. You almost bust out laughing at his double chin bouncing around like a turkey's wattle. And do you think I appreciate being called 'the evil Dr. Frenkenstein'? Word gets around. You have no respect for anything, do you? Besides that, people in high places seem to have a strong dislike for you. Just as you suspected. He takes his glasses off his fat face and wipes the steam away.

"Well, about this 'people in high places' thing, I have a strong dislike for assholes who have no respect for the environment," you lie for the one-millionth time in your life. "And if I call you 'the evil Dr. Frenkenstein,' it's all in jest. You should hear the things I call my parents and I respect them." (Number one million one.)

"Okay, fine, I'll give you a good recommendation. I just ask that you not come back here again. You have a way of upsetting people with your direct and occasionally vulgar and threatening manner. I hope to God you work on that, it will cause you a lot of problems."

"Yeah, you're right. It comes from my rough childhood. Had to wear a tough face. But I think I'm growing out of it."

Perhaps. Maybe. Yes, you were much feistier we saw as an undergraduate. I came close to firing you a couple of times. But what really rks me is all the time you spent on those damn coffee pants. I mean, what could possess someone to take a silly hobby so seriously and procrastinate with the advancement of science? That's what we're here for, you know."

I know. I can't make excuses and if I told you I was sorry I'd be lying. This will be hard to believe, but the reason I started the whole thing was just to stop people from illegally dumping toxic waste." (Number one million two.) "The way one ties to the other is a bit complicated. I had to make some dangerously unethical deals. But I had to do it, you know."

what a nature-freak I am, always recycling and camping and stuff." (Which you do for style, not because you care.) "I kind of regret what I did," (number one million three) "but I know it did far more good than harm." (Million four) "The way I see it, I kept people from illegally dumping waste and also kept them from going to jail for it. I'd hate to see students here in that kind of trouble." (Million five) "But anyway, I had to show I was working on the coffee plants to make it believable. Does that make sense?"

"Somewhat. Strange story. It's vague and I don't want details. You don't know how far over your head you were. It's not healthy to go around threatening powerful people. If you felt that strongly about the toxic waste you should have secretly notified the proper authorities. But then you're right, someone might've gone to prison. I'm glad we had this little chat, for the longest time I was under the impression that you were just some kind of lazy nut with a coffee fetish. I never realized you had a worthy cause."

"Thanks, Dr. Feckstein. That makes me feel a lot better."

"Just be more careful in the future, please. Well, I have to go pay my respects to the president's family. I hope to God the FBI catches the scumbag who set off that bomb. First I better make sure Shauna's okay. I can't believe all these deaths in three days."

"God, I know. First that cop, then the president, his wife and kid, and those cops. And now right out in the hall. Scott. What's all that about anyway? Why's Shauna so upset?"

"Well, this is a bit gross, she caught him masturbating in the closet with some very odd pornography. She was naturally upset and called the campus police. When they got here he was dead. Apparently he couldn't deal with getting caught."

"Oh God!" you make a scrunched up face. "Don't tell me any more. Is there anything I can do?"

"No, I don't think so. Just don't bother Shauna. And don't go telling anyone, for Christ's sake."

"I won't." (Number one million six)

"Listen, I'm going to have someone continue with your research and I want to be able to contact you in case we need any information. Is that alright with you?"

"Sure. I'll be glad to help." (One million seven) "I'm taking a trip to Brazil for a few weeks, but when I get back I'll call." (One million eight)

"Great. I've been impressed with the work you've been doing the last few months, not coincidentally ever since your greenhouse was taken apart, even though I'm having trouble making any sense out of your results. But then it's the unexpected results in science that we really learn from. Well, I'm glad you worked it into your dissertation defense; it's the only reason the committee approved you. Anyway, if things work out we might apply for a patent on some of these new materials."

"That'd be great. A little money coming in for the chemistry department can't hurt."

"That's the spirit." he laughs and jiggles about like something only Bill Cosby would have the audacity to call food. (Mmmmm good), making his pocket protector fall out of his shirt pocket. You pick it up for him. "It's good we got our past differences put behind us. I just wish it could have happened sooner."

"Yeah. I'm sorry, but you understand I couldn't tell you why I studied coffee plants. To me the earth comes first," (one million nine) "pursuit of knowledge comes second," (one million ten) "and if I make big money or not is no major thing." (One million eleven) "But I look at the greenhouse as a good learning experience. You wouldn't believe the amount of botany I've picked up."



"Maybe you should go into botany."

"Not for me."

"Well, I've got things to do. Call me when you get back."

"Will do. Thanks for everything, Dr. Feckstein. You've been a great mentor." (One million twelve)

"Well, thank you. I'm glad to hear you say that. Good-bye. Take care of yourself."

I will, you do the same. You shake his plump, moist hand and walk out, then wipe your hand on your jeans, just as the paramedics haul off Scott's fat bloody carcass. Christ, that was horrid. Good, now maybe you'll be able to get a job.

You decide to take a little stroll by the explosion's sight. FBI agents are still crawling all over the place, shooting pictures, picking up bits of debris. No way in hell they'll trace the explosives, homemade. About fifty ogles ogle away awed by the destruction. You overhear some kids going, "Whoa. Cool." You'd have to agree. Two pounds of cyclotrimethylene amine equals total destruction. The president, his wife and young son, and two cops killed by the explosion. Two cops seriously injured. Dis widdle piggy went dis way, dis widdle piggy went daa, dis widdle piggy went squeee, squeee, squeee, sp at.

Evening, Doctor. You say to your friend, Dr. Mick Retrados, the rich Spanish/English professor. He's from Spain, he teaches English. His house is so immaculate it's like standing in a *Better Homes and Gardens* illustration.

"Evening, Doctor, to you," he laughs and shakes your hand.

"God, it's hard getting used to that title," you laugh back.

"Want some coffee?" he offers. Coffee is the main interest the two of you share.

"No, there's no time. I'd like to get to the airport. Here're the keys to Amy's car. Take good care of it or she'll kill me," you warn.

"Don't you worry about that. Let's drive my Rolls to the airport, though. I haven't had her out in three days. I bike to the university. Anyway, you've got an hour-and-a-half before your plane leaves. What's the rush? I've got this new Mexican coffee my uncle just sent me."

"Well, maybe one quick cup." You stare around at all the Mexican/Spanish artwork—a bit too gaudy for your tastes. His wife comes out with the coffee, cream, and sugar in fancy porcelain cups and pitchers on a silver tray. Now that's service. And she hardly says a word, the mark of a good woman. Pretty damn hot too. It's obvious why half his poetry is about how much he loves her. He tells you about a coffee shop he wants to open.

Hey, "S'rrrrrrp. I've got a few ideas about that," you reply and finish your cup, fresh roasted coffee right there at the store. I'll talk to the people at the plantation. Maybe I can work out a deal and get a few pointers.

"Excellent!" Well, I can tell you're anxious to leave. Let's get you to the plane.

"Bye-bye, papa. I love you." His little girl runs, jumps into his arms, and kisses him. God, how pathetic. That must really suck, having to care for a little money drain like that, no matter how cute she is.

"Awww, she's adorable." you lie yet again. "Well, she is, but who cares?"

"You should have some kids," he suggests.

"Not yet! Not 'til I get enough money."

"You'll get a job soon, worry not."

"I hope so."

"By all the gods, man. You're young, bright, and have a Ph.D. in chemistry. You'll see. In no time at all you'll get a good-paying job that you thoroughly enjoy."

Ravenously devouring g gantic wedges of cheddar and imported Swiss on a freezing night of reality more real than a cold gun, green naked men and women poured out of undulating walls. Small balls felt on the ceiling mouse testicles, leeching the water, feeling the ceiling, twisting and writhing on the floor, a whore of hallucinated hallucinations. And at night

Sinking, hunking back down to "Earth" Is that what it is? FLUCK I'm a Smurf! Again The sign of blue XTC

Damn my birth worth only words. Schizophrenic feces! Murder/kill/rape it all! Murder the Smurfs in cold blue blood. Unsheathe the blade and slip into the freezer. Eyes bees ice cubes. Cooling, minuscule blue ice cubes

Fly high Cheese Ranger stranger than fiction. Ice cubes on no friction. Slide into my world. Here we share unity in bare insanity, a poet's vanity. It's not fair, so get your share before it's gone. \$5.00

## Low pH

How many times have I died this month, committed suicide in my mind, movie theatre? Popcorn, snuff, porn, forlorn, forgotten like the 2 week old pile of dirty laundry in the corner.

I just need a better drug, or maybe more of the ones I'm taking now. All my friends are made in bathtubs. Now, in more dead than they are. Rolled up, compressed, packed into a gel cap, swallowed, injected, smoked, snorted, neurons sorted and compartmentalized. Mental eyes.

I want my ashes to be mixed into the next production lot of Valium™ or Prozac™. Or maybe spread across a field of pot or poppies. Maybe the next time you drop acid, I'll be faced with me. Have a nice trip, dipshit.

See the colors dance w/o the r/pans, naked, exposed for what they really are: superstar for eight hours, center of the universe. You're so intelligent, you're so perfect, you're so cool, you're so hot that I'd pay good money just to fuck your shadow. It beats having intercourse with your mind. You've been screwed in the brain so many times that when you let me in there I can't feel anything: cerebral, porn star. As though I'm mentally masturbating with a glass of water. Like water, I see right through you, ghost man, transparency dude. From solid to gel to liquid to vapor to void. If you don't believe me go look in a mirror. Are you afraid? You've reached your destination, you've become... you know... like one with the universe. Void is everywhere.

You're welcome. I gave you this. I'm a chemist. I kill myself a thousand times every day. And the next time you drop acid... I might be faced with me.

<Bing> "Attention all passengers. Please fasten your safety belt, return your seat to the upright position, secure your tray to the seat in front of you, and turn off all electronic devices, head phones, radios, and cellular phones. After we have attained cruising altitude you may blah blah blah. Blah oxygen mask blah blah flotation device blah. We hope you enjoy your flight on blah blah blah fuck n' b ah."

Damn, that stewardess has a fine ass. Only decent one on the whole Goddamned plane. Shit, they used to all be hotties. Damn equal rights bullshit. Next thing you know even looking at a hot chick will be an offense punishable by castration. Without anesthesia. You throw a lewd grin at her. Sure would be nice to join the Mue High Club. She gives you a half-assed smile back, because it's her job, obviously thinking, Go to Hell, creep, or something very similar. Fucking cunt.

The only magazine on the plane is some boring ass rag of a mag put out by the airline, travel ads, flight safety instructions, restaurants, etc. It gives you a laugh. Long distance travel has got to be the most heinous of all evils, no matter what the need for going, it hardly seems worth all the trouble, risk, and airline food.

Then you pat the little bag of coffee beans in your pocket and change your mind, hoping the beans send you on your way to glory like Jack and the Beanstalk. You won't have any giants to slay though. But then that's what Jack thought. And it's unlikely you'll find a golden egg-lavin' goose. But then if the bitch won't shut Fort Knox, her ass is going in the oven.

The engine blasts away and the plane rumbles. That's just to push this big flying coffin forward to wait in line up at the runway. Oh joy. Then wait. And wait. A plane takes off. Then another. And yet another. Wait some more. Still another jet goes through its flight with gravity so it can tangle up the clouds and choke the air with white ribbons of water vapor and fuel exhaust.

Finally the seat pushes on your back with an odd familiar feeling to propel you forward with this flying tin can. The runway runs away at almost two hundred miles per hour. So do the trees. And people. And houses and cars and streets and... well, everything below. You're the center and everything's relative. Thanks A. Force equals mass times acceleration. Thanks Isaac. Acceleration, the second derivative of position with respect to time. Energy, the scalar product of force and distance.

A hundred thermodynamic equations fly through your brain even faster than the plane flies through the clouds. The approximate Gibbs free energy of combustion of jet fuel, the change in gas volume, temperature, pressure, and other state functions. The work's equal to the plane's altitude times the acceleration due to gravity times the mass of the plane. That's just to raise the plane up. Then to hold it up the forces must balance. And of course there's always wind resistance. Jeez. Hell with it! This is mostly physics, it ain't chemistry. You smile and think to yourself what a wonderfully un-useful thing a Ph.D. degree is. Just think, all these other fools in this aluminum foil tube with wings are staring out the windows, thrilled by flying through the clouds like no bird ever could. They don't care how it works and, even if they did, at least ninety-nine percent of them don't have the brains to figure it out anyway. Let them watch their Star Trek fantasies on the idiot box if they need to feel awed by anything. And even with all your education about the only thing you could contribute to the construction of a jet plane is to maybe build a battery for it. The more you know the more you realize you don't know a Goddamned thing. Ooooo, how deep—like that's really revealing anything. But then once you know that, you know everything. Uh... Yeah.

<Bing> "Attention all passengers. We have reached cruising altitude. You may now blah blah blah and still more fucking blah."

You unfasten your belt and lean the seat back. The stewardess offers you coffee, tea, soft

drink or juice. Hmm. Coffee? No. Fuck this cheap airline bullshit, not when you're on your way to Brazil.

Juice, you say without a "please" or "thank you" or even remotely courteous gesture, not for this whore with the shitty attitude. Watered-down cheap frozen concentrated sweetened processed artificially flavored swirl. Sip. Gulp, gulp. You look out the window, trying to ignore the dork in the zoot suit next to you with the cell phone and laptop. Cheesy bastard. Clouds. Fast clouds. Boring. Nove time!

You crack it open to where you had the page dog-eared. Arturo's showing his cult following of fools how to achieve enlightenment by having every one of their limbs amputated so they can be just like him. Cool. *Geek Love* by Katherine Dunn. Great book so far. Damn it! Bloody turbulence.

On to São Paulo. Fucking ten-hour flight. The plane's visible from forty miles away, just look for the giant green cloud. Cool. Get off plane. Damn this Portuguese gobbensh everyone's chattering at each other. Oh well. Go wait for duffel bag to come out on the conveyor belt. I like a mongoose waiting for a snake to come out of its hole. Fifty or so people wait for the luggage. Then the snake comes out, twisting and turning, trying to avoid the people. Luggage has this ancient reptilian instinct to avoid its owners at all cost. Appropriately enough, the first bag coming out is a genuine alligator monstrosity of a storage cabinet that probably took half the Everglades population to make. The mongoose closes in. A big fat old lady grabs the head of the snake and yanks it off the conveyor belt. It would be perfect justice for her to be digested by a thirty-foot python, but, as it is, she only dies of ptomaine poison at the age of eighty-seven from eating undercooked turtle soup. Your duffel bag is at the tail of the serpent. Then go through customs, but your ride's not here yet, so all you have to do is wait around anyway. And wait. And wait. And wait some more. Damn it all! Sons-of-bitches said they'd send somebody to get you. Aww, shit! Might as well go outside and get some fresh air.

So much for fresh air. I like every big overcrowded metropolis, polluted as a hell. Well, at least it ain't New York City. And also, like every big, overcrowded metropolis, the majority of the pollution is actually the people in it.

Scuse me, meester, you got some catsup on yo' shirt, some young punk informs you, picks up a piece of newspaper off the ground, and pretends to wipe the nonexistent stain from the back of your shirt. Old trick. He's good. You can just barely feel it. He almost falls over as he starts to run away with you grabbing onto his arm. Even under the pressure, the little roach won't let go of your wallet. Okay, let's have some fun. "Aaaaaiii!" "Vai a merda!" Jeez, what a puss. You didn't even break anything. Yet.

<Sklick!> The little turd flicks out a cheap stiletto blade, sloppily slashing instead of stabbing as he should. Not that it would do him any good, of course.

<Crack! Snap! Pow! Biff! Wham! Whud!> And other comic book noises omitted to conserve paper, ink, and sanity. That should keep him out of commission for at least a couple of months. Shit. You went a little overboard. Heh, heh. Oh well. Other kids start to close in, coming your way fast. Uh oh. They briskly walk off when cops run out of the airport in your direction. Whew.

Não se mova! Two cops yell, run up, and try to grab you.

Jesus fucking Christ! What is your problem?! you yell, and flip one of the cops onto the ground. The other holds his gun on you. "Shit!" You put your hands up, immediately trying to explain. "That little punk tried to steal my wallet! What the hell are you arresting me for?"

No speak Portuguese?! the cop with the gun yells at you as if not speaking Portuguese were a greater crime than picking pockets and stabbing people.

'No I'm American. Look. Wallet. On ground. Mine. Comprende?' you try to explain using very slow hand motions so the dumb ass pig won't blow your head off.

"I speak a leetle Eenglish," the other cop rubs his head and gets up. He motions for the other cop to put his gun away. "Are you still under arrest for assaulting an officer? Me?" He surprises you with a hard push, making you almost fall over backwards. But you catch yourself poised for a kick. Luckily brain works faster than reflexes this time and you do nothing.

Aaaa! Merda!" the kid on the ground moans like a baby as more cops come running up and a crowd gathers round. 'Chupa minha pica bicha!!!!' he turns and yells at you.

'Look, I'm sorry, you startled me when you ran up on me like that,' you apologize. 'See, that little shit tried to steal my wallet and then stab me.' The cops inspect your wallet and the kid's knife on the ground. Two of them bend over the kid, trying to soothe him as they see his wrists bent backwards. Tsk, tsk. You really shouldn't've curb-stomped his arm, you naughty pugnacious person, you.

'Man, if you try to kill everyone who wants to rip you off around here you'll be fighting half the country. Sheet, man, you crippled this kid.' Look at his arm! Was your wallet worth that?

**'To hell with my wallet! He tried to stab me!'**

'He wouldn't had to if you geev eem da damn wallet instead of beat da sheet out of eem. Man, we gonna have to take you in.' Of course they will. To get every penny they can out of you. Shit. There's not a Goddamn thing to be done. <Click shkick> go the cuffs on your wrists. Goddamn it!

The cops chase the crowd away and an ambulance pulls up for the kid. Shit. Echoes from the siren slowly die out in the giant parking garage like a cat being stretched on a rack. The head cop radios in a bunch of Portuguese nonsense and your name as he reads it from the wallet and passport then takes the cash out.

**"Hey!** Leave the cash alone," you stupidly demand. A big cop grabs your cuffs and raises up your arms behind you. 'Oww.' Goddamn pigs! They all start laughing. Cops. The same the world over.

Then, of all the crazy things, this lean, tall geek in a cheesy Miami Vice leisure suit walks up and starts laughing with the cops, obviously knows them, maybe a supervisor. He looks you over and about falls over giggling. Har de har fuckin' har, asshole. Then he starts going on about foo-chee bo! Obviously sports are more important around here than anything else. You just about tell the asshole off but then some crazy vibe tells you something weird is very much up and to keep your mouth shut. It is. You do. The big cop that was so anxious to pull your arms out of the r sockets now unlocks the cuffs as the suit-wearing geek reaches out to shake

'I'm your ride, Miguel. Nice to meet you.'

You hesitantly rub your wrists and oblige. 'My ride?'

'Sorry I'm late. Da roads re pretty fuckin' muddy right now, we just had a sheet load o' rain. But at least I get here before day put you een preeson. No? Ha ha ha.' He translates his weak humor to the cops who laugh like little puppets. Typical.

'Heh heh. Yeah, no shit. Must be my lucky day,' you pathetically laugh, obviously not thinking it's funny, and flash the big cop a 'go-fuck-yourself' sneer. The thief-cop hands you the wallet, the cash, and a rather lame, sorry-pal, sheepish smile.

By man, we got a busy day for us. Jorge's dyin' to talk to you, man. Sheet, you almost a fuckenge legend down here around all dees big coffee growers, what wit all dat crazy sheet you do wit coffee. Day say you play coffee god.

'That good or bad?'



'Well, not too many people work on da crossbreeds anymore. But you, man, you try any damn teeng. Me, I'd say eet's good, cept ain't made no money yet. Ha ha ha ha.' He slips a big handful of bills to the head cop and says farewells to all.

'Okay, okay. Ha, ha, ha. Rub it in. Now that was funny, you must admit. Unfortunately true. Maybe this guy ain't so bad after all. Hell, if he knows cops well enough to buy 'em off he can't be all bad. You pick up your bags and start to walk off, eager to leave.

By truck's dead-end way.

'Oh, okay. So how'd you know that was me back there?' you ask as the ambulance waits off and the cops finally start to slowly disperse like a lingering, rancid fart.

'Seen yo' picture in a chemistry magazine.'

'Yah, *Journal of Electrochemistry*. You a chemist?' you guess enthusiastically, wondering what a chauffeur/gofer would be doing reading a chem. journal.

'Naw, man, I was just lookin' for stuff on coffee and saw yo' name on da computer, so I check eet out and sees dis cheemistry stuff.'

'Ah, so you're a coffee farmer? you guess wrongly again.

'Sheet no, man! I hate coffee. Ever seence I work on da plantation when I was a leetle, keed I hate eet. Why you like eet so much? Dere's better ways make yo' head feel good.'

Jesus Christ. Blasphemy. Nothing short of blasphemy. God, what an idiot. A complete and utter bafoon. An imbecilic moron of less than no taste. You should've known from the costume he's wearing.

Okay. So you're not a chemist or coffee grower. Why were you reading that paper on solid-state fuel-cell electrolytes? If you don't mind me asking.

'Naw, I don't mind. Like I say, I was just lookin' up stuff on coffee for Jorge and I saw yo' name on da computer, so I check it out and find dat article wit' yo' picture. Ere's da truck. Then I copy it off for Mr. Campos. Jorge's all da time readin' bout new stuff on coffee.'

I'd expect so. You don't get to be coffee tycoon of the world by lettin' yourself fall behind. You summarize, tossing your duffel bag into the maddied Bronco as he starts it and its roar echoes under the parking garage. Pulling out into daylight, you blink, squint, and watch a plane rumble by overhead, fading away into the horizon.

'Yah, man, Mr. Campos's dyin' to meet you.'

It's amazing that anyone can drive in this insane traffic. It makes downtown LA look like a slow country drive. Cars zip in and out between each other while suicidal motorcycle drivers go zipping in and out between the cars. The city's infested wth shantytowns, *favelas*, cheap boards nailed up for villages of makeshift houses. No utilities, of course. Christ, most dogs in the US have better houses than that. But then most dogs in the US have a great deal more intelligence than these human cockroaches.

So on and on it goes with Miguel talking even faster than he drives as you finally get out of the city and drive through several small towns. And smaller. And still smaller. Fifty kids run around barefoot in the streets, chasing dogs or chickens or some type of soccer ball substitute. All the adults look skinny and worn out, even more than the clothes they're wearing. Miguel has to slow down when he drives through these little *mosquitos*. This lets you get a good look at all the poverty, scrawny farm animals in the street, shack houses you could probably kick over, only one or two rusted old trucks per town, toothlessness of a people. Stupid, worthless, ignorant peasants.

When passing through one small village Miguel yells out the window to a very young girl, "Ei menina! Voce é gostosa! Ha ha ha ha. ?!"

The weather becomes a bit cooler the further inland you go. Dig in duffel bag. Get out sweatshirt. And you finally see it for the first time in your life: acres and acres of coffee. And

more acres and more acres and more. Holy Mother of God. You're finally here. There're a few blooms on the trees so you crack the window to bring in the smell with a loud whipping of air thankfully drowning out Miguel's nonstop chatter violating your eardrums. Wherever there aren't coffee orchards, tropical growth jumps out from everywhere attacking the highways and roads. Every dirty miles or so tractors try to fight it back, apparently winning the war. The moist sweet smells pleasurably assault you like a nymphomaniac teenage girl gone crazy. You submit, lay back, and let her do what she will. The sensuous odors almost make you fling the door open, leap out, and go running off into the lush green jungle, never to be seen again. But then, fuck it, you ain't Tarzan.

Miguel plays some awful Latino top-twenty noise on the stereo just loud enough so it unfortunately doesn't drown him out totally. How anyone can talk so much about "foo-chee boi," is absolute bullshit, well, you have to be there. Oh wait. You are. So you have to sit there through a several hour drive listening to all this. When he starts going on and on about what a real man he is, satisfying his wife and several girlfriends, is the point where it borders on intolerable. The jungle's looking better and better. Then you pass by several more coffee plantations.

"Hey Miguel, can we stop for a minute?"

"Choo gotta take a peess, man?"

"Naw. I just wanna look at the coffee trees."

"No you don't, man. Dis ere's a pretty small farm. See da small farmers don't like eet when somebody say don't know starts checkin' out dey plantation, 'specially somebody from one o' da big plantations. Jorge buys dese leetle farms when times get bad, so dey don't much like 'im. An' dey don't like eet when da competition comes around. If you s'by yo' self eet wouldn't be so bad, you just say yo' a tourest an' dey don't care so much."

"Ah, I see. So anyway, why didn't Jorge just have me fly out to one of the smaller airports rather than have you come out all this way to pick me up?" you have to question why the fates have chosen this particular torture for you. Not that you haven't committed enough sins in your minuscule life to deserve it, but hey, even Hitler would have deserved better than to have to listen to Miguel's incessant mindless chatter.

"I had to come out to São Paulo anyway, do some beesiness, so eet be cheaper fo' me just peck you up out ere. You don't mind?"

"Naw, nothin' like a nice quiet drive through the country, lookin' at all the coffee trees and the jungle to relax a body." you emphasize the word "quiet," hoping he'll get the idea.

"Yah, man. I know what choo mean. But sheet, man, dis ain't no jungle. You oughta check out da Amazon on yo' way back to da states. Man, I love dees truck, eet's so Goddamn fast. We don't ninety all da way. Man, one time I take out dis girl an' when I geet'er 'ome 'bout one in da mornin' er fodder so mad."

*Campus Coffees* the sign reads in its stylish logo lettering.

"Hey! Is this it? The plantation?" you about jump out of the seat. And probably would have if not for the seatbelt.

"Yeah, man, but..."

"Pull over. Stop the truck."

"Sheet, man, okay, okay."

You run up to the nearest tree, wishing Miguel wasn't there so you could talk to it. "Hey, gorgeous, what's your name?" you whisper low and bury your nose in the few blossoms there are, breathing in deeply the heady vapors. "Wow..." It reminds you of the old greenhouse lab. Ahh memories. Like a husband who hasn't seen his wife in weeks, you instantly plunder its fruits,

d.sregarding any formalities. The fruits aren't the greatest. You've had better lovers. But in times of scarce love, who's complaining? Not you.

A few peasants are a ways off, picking the red cherries off the trees (coffee berries are called cherries), leaving the green ones for another day. They give you the once-over and keep slaving away so as not to miss out on any of their wonderfully high wages. It sure is nice of them to spend their lives working for pennies and living in crowded shacks so they can bring the rest of the world its wake-up juice.

They've already picked most of the red cherries but there're a few good ones left, so you pick only the reddest you can find. The sweet, pulpy fruit encases your tongue just as your mouth encases the cherry. Chew slowly. Savor the flavor. Then spit the seeds out. But not on the ground, as one might with watermelon seeds. No, you look at them in your hand, the light tan-green, slippery seeds. Wiping them off, you stick them in your pocket, nifty souvenirs, and pick a few more handfuls to take with you, going from tree to tree like a sultan going from girl to girl in his harem. *Robusta* coffee. Cheap shit. But the ignorant masses need their low-cost caffeine, be it canned and pre-ground or instant. You've seldom seen raw *robusta* round beans with a straight cleft slit in the bean, as opposed to the more oval bean and curved cleft of *Arabica* beans. Hmm. This could be a crossbreed *Robusta/capernaum* coffee, worthless manure grown for mass production, devoid of any flavor. Any good flavor, that is, plenty of bad flavor. Especially if it's turned into instant coffee and even more so if it goes to some crappy restaurant where they let it sit on a hot plate for hours on end, so it tastes like burnt floor sweepings from a livestock auction. The fruit still tastes pretty damn good, though. Too bad there's not enough pulp to make coffee marketable as fruit. Hmm. Future project? Could be.

'Ey man. You comin'?' Miguel yells.

"Hold on. You pick a few more and walk back to the truck.

'Got eenough?'

"Urhhhhmm." You chew an affirmative, smiling like you just got laid.

'Good, 'cause we got twenty-five kilometers to go.'

Hrrmm? You gulp some cherries and your disbelief.

'Dis a BEEEEEG plantation, man. Geet een, le's go.

Thank God. The mansion or, as they call it, hacienda. Listening to Miguel's about-over and done with. You hope.

Then I jump up in the air when day don't expect eet an' keeck da ball right in. Hey, I'll take yo' bags inside an' make sure yo' room's ready. C'mon in. Make yo'self at home an' I'll go geet Mr. Campos fo' you."

Silence is an amazingly beautiful sound. No music ever sounded so good. Wow. Incredibly place Jorge's got here—a bloody Playboy mansion in the middle of nowhere. Weird combinations of art battle each other on the walls, eighteenth-century French painting next to African masks next to. . . . What the fuck's that? A metallic post-modern-neoexpressionist sculpture of cubes and spheres doing obscene things to each other. Obviously meant to portray the warring conflicts of man's desire for the decadent ease which twentieth-century life offers (represented by the cubes) versus the innocent animalistic instincts of the primitive regions of our brains (represented by the spheres). Yeah, right. whatever.

A maze of hallways and rooms presents itself on either side. And who knows what's up the spiral stairs. Wanting to stretch your legs but not stray too far, you march onward, past a large ballroom and into a glass breakfast room twice the size of your apartment. Well, well, well. What have we here? A swimming pool with two wings of the mansion on either side. Not that you care about the pool, although a dip would be nice. What catches your eye is all the bikini-clad lovelies

running amuck. Easy to see where you'll be spending a lot of your time.

"So dere's where you run off to. You like da scenery, huh?" Miguel needlessly asks. "Maybe you take one o' dese girls home wit' choo, no?" Ha ha ha ha. "I got yo' room ready fo' you, but now Mr. Campos say come on to hees office."

"Ah, good, I can hardly wait."

Miguel leads you through the house to Mr. Campos' office.

"So! I finally meet the famous American coffee grower." Jorge Campos greets you with a big manly handshake after Miguel introduces you to him. "You had a good trip, I trust?"

"Yeah, no problems." (Except for bigmouth Miguel, that is.) "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Campos. Your plantation's amazing, I can't wait to look around."

"Cal, me Jorge. Sit, sit." The stout old Mexican seems as friendly as he does in all his commercials on TV, except now it's Jorge the multimillionaire instead of some rustic old farmer looking after his coffee trees, picking only the ripest beans for your coffee sipping pleasure.

"Yes, we're the biggest coffee producers in the world. And this's just a small part of all my plantations, as you no doubt already know. Miguel didn't talk your ears off, did he?" he teases his servant waiting patiently by the doorway of the simple yet sleek office where million-dollar decisions are made every day.

"No, not too bad," you lie. "He tells me he's a pretty good soccer player."

"Yes he is, and there's a big game tomorrow. Am I right, Miguel?" he asks.

"Yah, an' we got practice tonight. Should I go early?" Miguel eagerly asks.

"Absolutely. You better win tomorrow. I bet our friend here would like to see you win too. How about if you want to see Miguel's game tomorrow night?" Jorge asks you.

"Sounds great." It's sure beat listening to him talk about it.

"Okay. You go practice hard so you can win tomorrow, Miguel."

"Sure Theeng, Mr. Campos. I see you tomorrow."

"See ya, Miguel," you add before he leaves, just for the sake of pretending to act like you're trying to appear to be polite. Sort of.

"Mañana," he says and closes the door. Whew. Thank God he's gone. Stupid people suck. Hopefully Jorge won't be as bad.

"These're comfy chairs," you make small talk.

"Yes, just leather and steel. I think they're Italian or something. My decorator takes care of all this. I told him I wanted a very efficient office with no distractions, unlike the rest of the house, as I'm sure you saw."

"Yeah, I noticed all the artwork by the main entrance. And that ballroom with all the Spanish paintings is amazing, very festive."

"Yes, the house is mostly designed to entertain rich guests. When I really want to relax, however, I go sit out by the pool."

"Ah yes, I saw the pool. I see why you like to spend a lot of time out there." The two of you share a knowing smirk. Must be nice having your own personal harem of teenage Latina babes lounging by a pool all day just waiting for you to come by and fuck them.

"Well, anyway, it's getting late. Should we get down to business or eat first? I know you've been traveling all day. I bet you're starved," he surmises.

"Hm. Not really. I've been kind of anxious to get business out of the way. So, if you're not too hungry, maybe we could talk about this new coffee I've developed."

"Very well, business it is." He pulls up a chair by you rather than hang out behind his big desk. An interesting move showing that, for the moment, he's stepping down from his high position of power. And he doesn't invade your space, like many Latin men do. He wants you to

relax and not feel under any pressure. "Okay, show me what you got."

"These," you pull out the small bag, "are the beans. You can see they look very similar to *arabica* beans, however they're not. The plant itself is very different from other types of coffee. The flavor of the beans is similar to *Arabica*, though a little bitter. That's because of the high caffeine content. It has almost three times higher caffeine than *arabica*. And..."

"Yes, I remember you saying that. Three times higher?"

"Yes, about."

"You realize most of the public doesn't quite like that much caffeine. Some do, but most don't. However, this doesn't mean we can't use it. Tell me more."

"Um... Well, it matures in about three years and grows faster than most *arabica* or even *robusta* plants. It grows best in warm, humid conditions, like *robusta*. Here, let..."

"Grows faster than *robusta*?"

"A little. I only had two *robusta* trees growing in the same conditions as the mutant tree, but I think it's safe to say it grows faster. You can see he's impressed."

"How does it hold up to cold weather?"

"Um... I didn't test that. Let me show you my lab book and charts. I..."

"That won't be necessary. Are these all the beans you have?"

"Actually no, I've got about a hundred more fertile beans I can send. A friend's holding them for safekeeping. That's five years' worth of work. If I keep a few of the beans for myself for research purposes, of course..."

"Of course. How did you make this new type of coffee?"

"Well, that's a secret I'd prefer to keep, but the original bean was a Kenyan AA and I simply mutated it. I call it XRM..."

"Exarrem. Sounds exotic," he accentuates each syllable, letting them drip from his tongue like honey from a leaky beehive. "Very well, so you won't give out the secret. You're a smart businessman. Now the real question: How does it taste?"

"Well, it retains its acidity fairly well, and..."

"I don't mean to keep interrupting, but what I'm asking is do you have any of the roasted beans with you, by any chance?"

"Yes, I do. I don't have much, but they're in my duffel bag wherever Miguel put it. Should we get some and try it out?"

"How much do you have and what's the roast?"

"About half a pound of American roast, but it was roasted over two months ago."

"That doesn't matter; most of the public has never had fresh roasted coffee, so if it's a little old then that's unfortunately how it will reach most of the consumers anyway. Wow! He's really on the ball!"

"Yah, I'd like to talk more about fresh roasted coffee later on..."

"Certainly, certainly. Anyway, I don't want to try it right now, maybe tomorrow morning. I'm going to have it cupped by some of my best brokers before deciding if I will buy it. I wish you had more raw beans for that. Now for the most important question: How much are you asking?"

"Well, I spent a long time on it, so..."

"I will not take that into consideration; you must understand." Jeez, this guy really plays hardball. No wonder he's a fucking multimillionaire.

"Um... Well, fifty thousand..."

Long pause. He rubs his chin in a manner keen, calculating, and annoying as all hell. Christ, how long does it take this guy to think?"

'No, I cannot do that.' 'Shit!' 'It's too much of a gamble and let me explain why.' 'As if you had another choice.' 'If I were to support every new idea or invention by giving people what they thought the ideas were worth then I would soon be broke. On the other hand, if I do not look for new ideas then I would soon fall behind my competitors. For all I know these could just be normal *arabica* beans. Though I don't think you're lying. It is not wise to try to pull a scam on me. Many have tried and all regretted it. Anyway, let me make you an offer which you might like.'

'Okay. Shoot.' 'What've you got to lose?'

'I realize you spent a lot of time and hard work on this. Twenty five thousand for at least seventy five of these beans. And, if the coffee does well on the market, I will give you five percent of the profit it brings in. I like to make offers like this to people because then they have a personal investment in what they do for me. How about it?' He's a shrewd dude.

Another long pause. This time you rub your chin. Now we'll let him do the waiting. He slumps just a little in the chair and rests his hands across his thick torso with his fingertips pressed together in anticipation of your answer. This is a common posture assumed by men who occupy seats of power. Throughout most of the known universe all enlightened species have passed a law making this gesture punishable by amputation of the fingers or tentacles or whatever the extremities just so happen to be.

'That just might work,' you answer, 'but...'

'But?'

'I'm wanting something more, something even better than money.'

'Women!?' he bursts out to ease the tension.

'Heh, heh, ho, ha, ha!...' Well, that would be nice too, but no. What I'm after is education. And I don't mean a grant or scholarship. I've had enough of school. I want to know all you can tell me about coffee.'

His eyes widen and he's visibly impressed. 'You want me to teach you about coffee?'

'Yes. Let's be realistic a minute. I'm not talking about botany, crossbreeds, soil composition, and all that near worthless laboratory crap I've been studying that seldom finds application in the real world.'

'But...' he gasps at such absurdities, and coming from a scientist no less.

'Let me explain. Science leads to the understanding of known facts, it very rarely, and almost never, leads to discovering new known facts. New facts usually are discovered completely accidentally. This problem has caused me no end of frustration and disappointment. What most scientists do all their lives is study some minute, tiny, minuscule part of a large system to try and make improvements on it, usually at a very high cost. I'm not saying this is bad, but there's a point where it becomes wasteful and ineffective.'

'For example I could take one hundred billion dollars and throw it all at finding a cure for cancer. Scientists would study gene sequences, chemotherapies, different diets, radiation therapies, causes of cancer, and so on, and still never find a cure.'

'Yes, but if we don't try then we may never.'

'Just a minute, let me go on. Then some freak accident happens. Somebody mixes... say piss and cigarette butts into an ice cream float then force feeds it to a lab rat with a tumor and Voila! no more tumor.'

'Man, that's crazy!'

Gregory Metcalf, a young fourteen year-old boy who once lived in El Paso, Texas, took great pleasure in torturing his younger brother Abe's pet rat. He did so by feeding it various hallucinogenic drugs and carcinogenic poisons. The unfortunate rat, whose name is being



withheld to protect the innocent, developed a rather hideous tumor on its rectum, which made for a pet with a rather poor disposition.

One day, having run out of any interesting poisons, Gregory grabbed a week-old banana-ice cream float out of the refrigerator, urinated into it, added some of his mother's cigarette butts, put the mess in a bowl, and fed it to the near-to-starving rat, who was also near-to-dying and grateful for one last disgusting meal. While all this was going on, younger brother Abe, inspired by an episode of *Beavis and Butt-head*, went running throughout the tiny mobile home with a Bic lighter screaming "Fire! Fire! Fire!" And, of course, he ran into the room his father told him to stay out of—the meth lab. <Ka-Boom!!!> Abe died. Gregory suffered severe third-degree burns over certain parts of his body, which made him unable to ever have children. The methamphetamine lab was destroyed and there was insufficient evidence for the parents to be prosecuted. However, there was more than ample evidence for MTV and Bic to be sued. Beavis could never again say "Fire!" childproof lighters were invented, and the parents became instantly rich so that they could build a new and-improved meth lab.

Unfortunately, MTV was neither bankrupted nor run out of business. We say unfortunate because, as all people with a set of normally functioning neurons behind their eyes know, with the sole exception of *Beavis and Butt-head*, MTV's, without a doubt, far unsurpassed as the single most useless invention ever conceived by the human, or perhaps any other race. Unless, of course, you count this book you're now reading. In fact, about nine hundred thousand years from now, a television signal was (will be) received on a planet where there was (will be) a massive search for extraterrestrial—correction, otherworldly intelligence going on. And, as fate would (will) have it, just what signal do you suppose they picked (will pick) up? The disappointment was (will be) so massive across their globe that they had (will have) all their antenna arrays recycled and built into a massive weapons system to keep all alien cultures at bay. This means nothing right now.

Anyway, the explosion broke the rat's cage and it crawled into a hole by the washing machine, which led under the trailer and to freedom. It awoke the next morning to find itself in a small compartment on the underneath side of a semi-truck trailer, feeling fine and dandy, if a bit hungry, and its tumor in complete remission. The truck started up and went to Los Angeles, where the rat hopped off. Being a rat of some taste and discretion, I decided to leave Los Angeles immediately and the fastest way out just so happened to be a boat headed to India. There it was caught by a priest and taken to the temple where rats are basically worshipped. The rat had many children and lived a full and happy life, well fed on rice and grains, which could have been used to feed starving devotees.

The moral of this drawn-out and somewhat twisted tale is: "Uhh, Huh, huh, hah. You said rectum. Huh, huh."

"Penicillin's just one example of a great accidental discovery," you tell Jorge.

"That's only one."

"The majority of modern technology is based on flukes and lucky accidents. So are those beans you have in your hand there. I call it shotgun science."

He looks at the beans with a puzzled frown. "Okay, so what are you getting at?"

"Simply this: I want more out of life than science. I want to know everything—or at least the basics, about how coffee is made, from parting it to brewing, most of all focusing on roasting."

"Okay, but now I absolutely have to ask: you've gotten my curiosity up—what's the purpose of all this?"

"Simple. First, knowledge for its own sake, second, a friend and I are thinking about opening a coffee shop with fresh roasted coffee beans—none of that month-old stale shit that most coffee shops serve."

"Aha! So now we're getting somewhere," his face beams with understanding.

"Yep. Can you help?"

"Hmm... chin-stroke, chin-stroke. "I have friends in New York and Boston who can help you much more than I can. They have coffee shops similar, I believe, to what you're talking about."

"That would be great also, but I want a complete tour of how your plantations work, in as much detail as we can squeeze in."

"You are not satisfied simply by reading of such things?"

"I am not."

"Now I'm beginning to understand. You seek experience. Not simply book knowledge. That is good, but I doubt that a tour of my plantation here will help you much. You see..."

"I'm fully aware you only grow only *robusta* and crossbreeds here, but I want to see and learn every aspect of growing coffee, not just gourmet beans. Although, yes, I'd like to focus on *arabica* coffee."

"Okay. I can do it," he consents. "But this isn't the right time of year for harvest. You probably noticed a few cherries on the trees, but to really get a good harvest I use the mechanical harvesters. We still pick the berries this time of year, but it's slow work, and if we use the machinery we tear up the trees too much for only a little bit of coffee. Oh, by São Paulo, where you flew in, there're more berries, 'cause it's a little warmer there. Oh yes, I'm sure you'll want to see our nursery. In the morning, I'll introduce you to Juan Ramirez, my best horticulturist here on this plantation. Then you'll want to see the curing process and then the all-important cupping and roasting. We'll start tomorrow, but now I'm hungry and dinner's getting cold. You like lobster?"

Your mile-wide grin says yes.

"<Urp> Oh, man, I'm stuffed. That was great," you pat-pat your tummy after dessert. "That was damn good banana ice-cream." Your words echo in the giant dining hall where, you can't help but think, a good percentage of the world's coffee deals are made. The long table could probably seat fifty. You and Jorge sit at one end across from each other, courteously avoiding the topic of business.

"We've got bananas everywhere so my cook goes crazy with bananas. No pun intended."

"Hm hm... Tell him to peel them, put them in the freezer a few days, and then thaw them out. They turn into this really awful looking brown mush that's unbelievably sweet, but it's great for yogurt and banana-nut bread. Tell your cook to give it a try sometime."

"I'll mention it to him. Maybe we ought to go outside on the patio and wash that dinner down with a little brandy and enjoy the night air," he suggests and summons the butler to clear away the table and bring the booze out to the patio.

"Yah, sounds good to me," you say, without really caring what he wants to do next, because whatever it is, you know it will have to be relaxing. These rich types are all alike. On he leads you through the halls of his mansion, out to the screened patio by the pool. The girls aren't out here anymore. Oh well... probably a bit too cold outside.

"So, tell me, what inspired your love of coffee to such extremes," he asks as you both settle down in a well-designed lawn chairs with a small metal table between them.

"Well, Jorge, it's hard to put my finger on it." You think hard and stare out the patio screen at the dark patch of jungle in the distance, illuminated by light posts around the mansion's

lawn. "Maybe it's the caffeine, but that can't be right because I hate those damn pep-pills. Maybe it's the sugar, but I don't care too much for soda pop and sometimes I just drink coffee black. I usually like cream with the coffee, but I don't drink milk by itself. I like the flavor of good coffee, but then if bad coffee is the only thing around I'll drink it too. Hell, I have no idea why coffee makes me feel so alive—I've never figured it out. Got any ideas?"

"I've never really understood why some people crave it so much... tradition or maybe habit. I suppose it doesn't really matter much to me as long as they continue," he shrugs.

"You don't like coffee?" you guess.

"Oh, I like it. I just don't think it's the greatest thing on Earth. For me it's mostly about money. I made some very good business moves when I took over my father's plantations in Mexico. This gave me the time to pursue a business degree at the University of Arizona. I made the right connections, bought some, and here in Brazil at the right time. From then on it was downhill. I can't take all the credit, though. Miguel has helped a lot, although he's not a businessman or even very good at any one thing. However, he's very loyal and someone like me must have people around who will do anything at the snap of a finger. I don't have time to take care of so many little things.

"That makes sense."

"Yes. Besides, Miguel saved my life once and I always reward people when they do something like that." Some jungle creature whoops it up in the trees so you pause and listen. "I love the jungle sounds," Jorge philosophizes. "I like to think of the world as a big jungle where predators lurk behind every tree."

The butler comes in with the brandy and speaking in Portuguese to Jorge. "You can't make out a bit of it, but who cares. It's really weird the way his servants are only visible when they're needed. Must be mind readers, or something. As long as they bring food and booze, who cares how they do it. Decent liquor."

"<Sluurp, gulp> How did Miguel save your life then?" you ask.

"I notice you make noise when you drink. That's good, it covers all the areas of the tongue. Well, what happened... <Sluurp> was I stumbled into a snake nest and was bitten here, here, and... it's hard to see it now... here," he shows you the scars on his right leg. "Miguel had a knife and he cut open the bites, sucked the poison, sent someone for help, and tied his tee-shirt around my leg. I almost died and I would have died for him. He can be a little tiring to be around sometimes, but in an emergency there's none better. And he grew up on my father's plantation, so he knows how everything works around here." <Slurp>."

Shit! No, he wouldn't. "Umm, who's going to show me around the plantation?" you ask, fearing the worst. <Slurp>."

"Well, I've given it some thought. Unfortunately Miguel's going to be busy at my plantation in Colombia." Awww, shucks. "Probably one of my best plantations, by the way. I'll introduce you to your guide later, but right now I want to talk a little more business." <Slurp>."

"About the new coffee beans?"

"No, I'm happy with that for now. Oh, tomorrow we'll sign a contract. I've been thinking about trying to cut out the middleman in the process of getting my coffee to the consumer, but in order to do that I'll need several roasting facilities in the U.S. If I do this you may not need to roast coffee at your store. It's a slightly expensive thing to do, especially for one little coffee shop. What I was thinking is this: I could either ship wholesale roasted coffee to you directly or—and I think you'll like this—set up a roasting facility in the same town as your coffee shop."

"You're kidding! That'd be great. I already know where I can get a used espresso machine and..."

Whoa, whoa, whoa. You're getting too excited. I like enthusiasm, but it's not certain yet. I'll tell my scouts to look into it. No more business tonight, no more coffee talk. My brain is full. You wouldn't believe what a busy day I've had. I'd tell you about it, but then I'd be talking business. Oh wait, we do have one more little item to discuss. Hold on just one minute. He walks over to the wall and presses some buttons on the intercom. More Portuguese gibberish is spat back and forth between Jorge and the wall. "I forgot I need to introduce you to your guide. You'll be shown around this plantation and then I was thinking maybe if there's time you can fly out to Peru and see one of my organic coffee plantations."

"Wow. That'd be perfect. I can't thank you enough."

"Yes, you can. Just keep studying coffee. I've followed your work in the journals closely and, even though you don't like science, I'd like to see you keep at it. Who knows, maybe you'll develop a coffee better than *arabica* and harderier than *robusta*. It's a long shot, but try, try, try."

"You don't have to worry about that. I've already got plans for a new greenhouse. And I didn't say I don't like science. I just think it's unimproved."

"Good, good. Glad to hear it." Of course he is—he's the one who'll be making a fortune off of any new coffee you develop.

"Organic coffee in Peru, huh? I never did see why organic food is so popular. I mean, it doesn't taste any better and the health benefits can't possibly outweigh the cost of it. Seems kind of silly to me."

"I agree about all that, but there's the environmental issue. Organic coffee production is much less harmful to the environment. People pay higher prices for it to ease their consciences of guilt from polluting the air with automobile exhaust, using disposable paper and plastic, or a million other things. And for some reason if people pay more they think it tastes better."

"Hmm. That's true, but I bet ordinary produce is sometimes sold as organic."

"Yes, it's rare, but it unfortunately happens, but the profits to be made are minimal. And when you do something like that you risk your reputation. Without a good reputation a business will soon fail. Ah, here she is, Rosangela, your guide and translator."

"Wow!" "Hi." Nice to meet you, you eagerly shake her little hand thinking she almost looks as good in a dress as in a bikini.

"Nice to meet you too," she says with a shy smile and just enough of an accent to be cute.

"As I said, Rosangela will show you around this plantation. And don't let her looks fool you, she's as smart about coffee as most anyone else around here. You may have a different guide at Peru. Oh, and when you go to Peru, tell them to take you to see the Amazon—anyone who comes to South America should see the Amazon. Rosangela is at your disposal whatever you need, she will provide." He pauses for emphasis. "Let me say that again. *Whatever* you need, she will provide." He pats you on the back with a go-get-em tiger grin. "Man, does this guy know how to treat his guests, or what?" As you stand there stupefied, he decides to turn-in. "I have a busy day tomorrow so I'm going to say goodnight. Make yourself at home."

"Uh. Wow. Thanks. Goodnight."

"Don't stay up too late, you've got a busy day tomorrow," he smiles, knowing you'll be up late anyway, and walks off into his maze of a giant house.

"So what would you like to talk about?" she seductively purrs the question as though she were a commercial for a one-nine-hundred-two-five-five sex line advertised during the USA Lip All Night movie.

There is only one logical answer to such a rhetorical question. "Talk?"

The calm before an apocalyptic ending or the signing of a peace treaty,

entreatings imporing begging that fate be kind this once,

this single even that I know the outcome of

even before peering down into the quantum well

The potential is outstanding if only the impossibility would lift itself

like any one of Salome's veils.

I am tempted, for once, to pray for the right to penetrate into this

black box in which I'm trapped

What crime have I committed to deserve this sentence?

What hideous evil could I have once been?

There's a lot to be said for looking into a mirror at one's own soul. There's also a lot to be said against it.

A cascading spiral of nothing and everything engulfs your mind, as do calm and panic, love and hate, war and peace. Dead tumor abortion babies sing lullabies. Trees scream of anguish and torture. Women curse them, they're all evil. So are men. And all capable of such tenderness. And kindness. But all a farce. All just a worthless waste of time and energy and matter and space and... what are we forgetting? In the end you see yourself fractured, no more pieces than there are numbers for 'Infinity plus one'. A hollow ringing laughter rips through the moist jungle air, filling it with... Nothing? Everything? Lemurs, monkeys, and birds cry back, pleading for mercy or cursing the fates, giving their primitive thanks or celebrating life. And all you can do is laugh. Laugh at the smells of the men around you. How feeble they are, how frail, how impotent, their lives. Laugh at their ugly women. Laugh at their primitive beliefs. Everything's just toys for you to play with. And nothing is the space where you play. What will happen when you grow up and it's time to put away your toys? Who cares? "**Ha haha hee ho haa heee thdaaaaa ha haha heya ho hee ha haa haaaaaaa**". You hear your own piercing laughter and can't tell where it's coming from.

'We are waiting,' the voices in the darkness tell you.

'Waiting for what?!!' you scream in your head.

No answer. The painted natives resemble legions of Death, a technological race of warriors from the farthest reaches of... space? Time? What is it? Control slowly returns to your body. Reality crashes in from all sides. They no longer hold you down. They're saying you must go now. Rejection? Scorn? Fear? Theirs? Yours? Vague emotions return and settle in. Why are they acting like this towards you? You did nothing to offend them. A burning sensation from the powder fills your nose, eyes, and throat, bringing you back to here and now. Everything solidifies into a grass hut. 'Spirits? Bah! Just hallucinations. Stupid natives. It was fun. But nothing you'd do twice. Maybe. Cotton mouth. The tour guide gives you some water. He says it's time to leave... before the natives get too upset... Upset at what?

'Wake up.'

'Hrmmph shf umbd.'

'Wake up, sir. We've landed. Get up,' the stewardess shakes you.

'Hm?' Oh. I'm back. Wonderful. 'Stupid fat bitch had to go and wake you up, didn't she? Fucking cunt. You silently curse her next flight to burst into flames. Get duffel bag, go out door, down ramp.

Amy's there. 'Shit. Life's a bitch. <Smoootch. Smoootch. Smooooooooootch> Goddamn horny wench. She starts sliding up and down on you right there in the airport. Old people stare, wishing they still had them. Young kids stare, anxious for when they will. And everyone else stares, thinking you're just a couple of fucking perverts, which you are.

'Tell me all about your trip.' She grabs your arm, walking next to you, heading for the luggage conveyor belt about a mile away.

'Not right now.' you mumble, your eyes half shut.

'You alright?' She gives you a puzzled look.

'Yeah. Let's go get the suitcase.' You stagger unfortunately, last enough for her to notice.

You're not alright. You look exhausted.

'Very good. Score ten points for observation. Don't talk anymore, please. I'm too tired for questions. Just get me home before I fall over.'

'Okay, hon. Whatever you say.'





'Okay. So, how was The Big Crapple?'

'What?' She misses your joke.

'New York. How was it?'

'Oh. New York was just great,' she rolls her eyes, not wanting to talk about it. 'How was Brazil?'

'You didn't get the part I take it?' Pointless question.

'I said New York was great—I didn't say I was.'

'Hon, you have always been, and always will be, great,' you flat out lie. 'Come on, get under the covers with me,' you pull the sheet back, wiggling a c-mere with your index finger.

'I'm not in the mood right now,' she sulks with her arms across her breasts, pouting as cute as a spoiled rotten little girl. Imagine that.

'Me either, I'm still exhausted,' you explain. 'Just c-mere and snuggle awhile. Please.'

Of course she slides over seductively and rests her head on your shoulder and her leg across yours. It's never been too hard to cheer her up, like all women, just hold her face in your hands and look in her eyes and voila! a happy bitch.

'Now tell me, how was Brazil and did you sell your beans?'

'Brazil was absolutely perfect beyond anything I could ever imagine and, yes, I sold the beans,' you grin with self-satisfaction.

'How much?'

she springs to attention. 'Women.'

'Half what I asked and more than I expected. Not to ment—'

'How much?'

'Well, actually I traded the beans for a magic cow.'

'HOW MUCH?!?!'

'Twenty-five, but—'

'WHAT?!?! That's it?!'

'What do you mean that's it?' Heil. I thought I did pretty damn good and—'

'Twenty-five hundred stinking dollars for all those years of work you did and you say it's pretty good?' You just gave—'

'Will you shush for one damn second?' 'Twenty-five thousand,' you say slowly to let it sink in.

'Oh.' She looks down, embarrassed, twirling your chest hair in her fingers.

'Jesus, what kind of idiot do you think I am? Never mind. Don't answer that. Heh heh.' You tickle her briefly under the covers.

'I'm sorry. I thought—'

You put your fingers to her lips to silence her; thinking is one of the things that she should not do.

'Twenty-five thousand?' she whispers in disbelief.

'Yep. Also got a tour of his plantations and several roasting facilities. Even got to see the Amazon. God, that was fucking weird. I never imagined stuff like that existed.'

'Wow. They paid for you to do all that, or did you have to pay for it yourself?'

'They did. I know why too, he wants me to keep working on coffee.'

'Oh shit!' she flumps back down on her pillow. Pillows are one of the few things onto which it is safe to flump. She rubs her temples with that not again look that only spoiled rotten women know how to make. Especially spoiled rotten blonde nymphomaniac dancer women with boobs and butts that are even more flumpable than pillows.

'I may, I may not. We'll see,' you try to put her at ease, knowing you will. 'But if I start another greenhouse it'll have to wait till I have more time.'

'So what'll you do with the money then? Buy a new car?" she hopes. Why does every Goddamn American think you're a nobody unless you own a car made within the last two years?

"Uh... Wrong! I was thinking I'd use some of it for the coffeehouse me and Mick were talking about."

"Oh shit. Look, you just got your degree. You're not gonna let it go to waste are you? I mean, Christ, you could get any job you wanted in chemistry."

"Yeah, right, a fat lot you know about what a bitch it is to get a job these days."

"Goddamn it. Don't start that again. I can't help it if dancers don't make good money."

"Depends where and how they dance. Heh, heh."

"You are not funny, asshole." She grabs the pillow onto which she had so gloriously flumped and pummels you with it over and over while you simultaneously laugh and beg for mercy.

"Stop! Heh hoo ha ha. Shit! Ow! I was just kidding! Damn it. Knock it off! Heh hee hee. Stop, please. Damn it, I'll get a job. Stop it, damn it. Quit playin'." You put up your arms in defense. Grab it. Ha! Now it's your turn.

"Eeee. Ow! Damn it. That's not fair! Ow! You hit harder! Stop!!" she whines.

"Yah, yah. What I thought, cry-baby. You can dish it out but choo-choo I take it."

"Look, why don't you go through your mail and phone messages?"

"Maybe later. It's waited two-and-a-half weeks, a little longer's not gonna matter." you figure.

"Some calls were from companies, maybe about jobs."

"Good. About Goddamn time. Speaking of time..." You look over at the clock. Six ten. "That's it? I've only been asleep six hours?"

"Thirty hours. It's Sunday," she informs you.

"Shit. I shouldn't've stayed so long in Colombia and Peru."

"No, you shouldn't have! You should have gone to see your grandparents in Florida like you told them you would, you asshole," she scolds, pushing out her lip, looking even more cross than what Jesus got nailed to.

"I know, I know, but I had business to take care of. Besides, every time I see my granddad he just goes on and on about how he's gonna be dead soon. For fifteen years he's been saying that. Fifteen years wasted. And now he's so old he's probably right. So many times I've felt like telling him to hurry up and get it over with so I won't have to hear his shit anymore. Oooph." you gasp as Amy punches your stomach. "Shit. I was just kidding. God, lighten up."

"Some things just aren't funny," she yells and stomps to the closet to get some clothes on.

"Hey, c'mon, you know I love my grandparents. Quit bein' like that."

Her only response is stern silence as she squeezes her boobs into a jogging bra, pants, and, in general, gives you her ordinary pissy attitude. You almost wish her bra would go jogging out the door right now with her in it. And not return. Except that would mean you'd get no pussy tonight. A dry spell is not what you need right now.

"C'mon, babe, I'll call the grandparents soon. Hey, let's go for a walk down to the pond. C'mon, a nice, quiet, romantic walk. How about if soon as possible we both go down to Florida to see the old farts?"

She turns and stares, her hands on her hips, but a tight-lipped smile on her lips.

"C'mon, hon. Please." you coax her with your arms around her waist as she looks down with a smile.

"Okay," she agrees.

Summer Sunday evening at the pond, feeding the ducks, the ones that aren't chasing each

other around, that is. There's a big circle of hippies and freaks playing drums a little ways off. They do that every damn Sunday. Amy makes a few remarks about how worthless they are. She's right, you must admit, all they do is sell drugs and sponge-beg for spare change on street corners. What a life. Oh, but then you forgot: they're in tune with the cosmic binding energy's wavelength through the Mother Earth Spirit in the Astral Plane, which is the true reality of existence, and not our material world in which we temporarily dwell and blah blah bah. Babylon will fall and blah bah bah. hemp can save the world and blah bah blah. And other LSD-induced schizophrenic delusions. You're embarrassed to admit you know about a fourth of them kids that hang out around the coffee shop or play in local bands. You and Amy quickly pass them by and go to toss some moldy breadcrumbs to the stupid lazy ducks and greedy grabby geese.

Staring into the pond, holding Amy's hand, for once not trying to jump each other's bones. This ain't so bad. Staring into the pond, watching little bubbles of methane pop up here and there. Tetrahedral point group. Pull my finger. Staring past the bubbles at a cloud of dirt and debris. Staring past the dirt and debris at a world only your imagination lets you see. Microbes and protistas and bacteria with their flagellum or is it flagella? or flagellae? Who cares? Mitosis. What a lousy way to breed. Poor widdle bacteria won't ever know what it's like to fuck or to listen to music or discover anything or even think. Aww, too bad.

"Hon?" Amy says.

"Yeah, babe?" You look up out of your daydream.

"I was thinking."

"Boy, that's a first," you want to say, but don't.

"Thinking what, hon?"

"I've got dance practice tonight for that show the dance company's putting on. But that's not til nine thirty. After we go home and make love, how about if you come over and watch me dance?"

Those bacteria got it made.

The way Amy kneads your back after an hour-and-a-half of love-making almost has you wishing you were a piece of raw pizza dough.

"I need a shower, hon. So do you. You are coming to watch me dance," she insists.

"I remember. You go ahead and shower. If we shower together there's a chance we may never get out of here."

"True, true." She kisses your back slowly, bites your ass with a growl, gets up, turns the idiot tube on real loud so you won't fall asleep, then prances off into the bathroom to shower.

Goddamn all television to the ninth level of Hell. Get up. Go to kitchen. Tuna. Can opener. Bread. Toaster. Tomato. Slice. Fix coffee? Nah, screw it. Grapefruit juice? Yeh! <Sproing...> Toast ready. <Scrape, scrape...> Shitty Toaster. Wash burnt crumbs down sink.

Couch. Change surf. <Munch, munch, munch...> Music videos, stupid cartoons, sitcom upon sitcom, commercials, a talk show, America's Least Wanted, America's Stupidest Home Videos, CNNNNNN. Terrorist attacks, earthquakes, inflation, stock market. News flash: Jet airliner bursts into flames over Rockies. No survivors. Death, death, death. Everyone loves to hear about death. <Click...> Enough of that garbage.

"Babe?" Amy yells from the bathroom.

"Yeah, hon?" you answer.

"Take a look at that crossword on the coffee table."

Great, from one type of garbage straight to another.

'Seven down," she yells. "It's safe to do on a pillow. Five letters. Starts with f

W four. W this, W that. Double your taxes, double your debt. Double you, double you, double you misery. Boxes and boxes of receipts to keep track of for tax purposes. Used espresso machine only two grand. Leased Coke fountain two hundred bucks. Shit. This sucks. Been working on this Goddamn hell-hole coffee shop for three weeks. Fucking kitchen had more grease in the clogged up stove vents than a drunk Exxon tanker captain could dump on Alaska. Well, at least that shitty diner finally closed down so you could get this prime location. Too bad they couldn't've taken all their Goddamn cockroaches and centroaches with them. But then it was nice of them to not pay their rent and leave behind a lot of furniture and equipment. Sure was nice of Amy's dad to rent the place to you so cheap. But then he owns half the town anyway. Now if the bloody bastard would just send Amy a paycheck to help with the bills at home. Lazy wench probably hasn't earned over a hundred dollars in her entire life.

"How about *Arabica Delight*?" Dr. Mick Retrado suggests names for the coffee bar while he and his wife paint the walls an ugly pastel pink they picked out. You'll have to repaint the place some day soon.

"Too quaint. Let's at least get a name somewhat modern. None of this *Kah's Pasture* or *Morning's Pleasure*. It's gotta really hit home, a name people can't resist. Like. . . I don't know. Think harder. A name the kids won't think is too cliché or politically correct. A name the old folks won't find offensive. A name that's daring, yet not vulgar. Common, man, you're the poet. Hang on a sec. I gotta call the exterminators again. Hello. Yes, we're that new coffee shop opening up at forty-two Bird Street. No, you may not put me on hold, the last two times you did that I had to wait ten minutes. All I want is for you to send someone out to spray. I don't care if there's a maximum number of times the health laws say you can spray. You have a contract to get rid of these roaches or refund our money. You've got the address, send someone out with bug spray or a check. Good-bye. <Click.> Sheesh. Some people! What were you saving?" you ask.

Julietta says how about *Insomnia*. Mick speaks for his wife while you punch numbers on your calculator.

"Beautiful. I love it!" And it's already being used. Keep thinking, keep thinking. Right now I have to go to a job interview. Some stinking government place. Pay should be good if I get the job. What's really crazy is they wouldn't even tell me what I'd be doing," you say while sorting the paperwork into several separate boxes.

"You must have some kind of idea," Mick assumes, getting paint on the windowsill when he looks your way.

"Not a clue. Must be real top-secret. Shhh, don't tell anyone," you wink. "And get that paint up out of the windowsill before it dries. Unless you plan on doing the whole place that awful color," you smirk and walk out the door. "And try to call Amy," you poke your head back in. "she's supposed to be helping you guys."

Thirty-five minutes drive downtown to the city. Shit, this will be a most suck if you get the job. But then at forty-five G's a year it'll be worth it. Maybe. Hell, you can get a good car with that kind of salary, one with a nice stereo that'll almost make the trip enjoyable. If someone doesn't rip off the stereo. Shit, planning for something and you don't even have the job yet. A Goddamn semi cuts you off. Stupid redneck truckers.

Parking downtown sucks. Parallel parking sucks worse. Shit, almost made it. Try again. There. Good enough. Fucking giant Cadillac parked behind you barely left enough space for you to squeeze Amy's Rabbit in. <Scraaaape> goes your key on the Cadillac's door.

Walk three blocks. Jeez, what a dumpy building for a chemistry lab to be in. If that's what the job is. Oh, of course it is. What else could it be? This can't be the right place. It looks more like a giant vacant factory or warehouse. The neighborhood looks even more run-down than the building. You see a bunch of worthless nigger trash in the middle of a crack or heroin deal about a block away.

<Burrrrrrr Burrrrrrr > goes the doorbell

'Identify yourself,' an almost computer sounding female voice comes on over the speaker next to the metal door.

'I have a job interview with Mr. Chuders at nine o'clock,' you say and give her your name then hold your driver's license up to the vid-cam for her to see: everyone knows a piece of plastic with a picture and number makes you who you are.

'I'll send a guard to escort you inside,' the voice says more ominously than Count Dracula saying 'Good evening.'

'Uh. Okay.' "A guard she says? Like they really have anything worth stealing in there. A guard? An electronic beep sounds off and an automatic bolt slides in the door. It opens. Not a guard, *three* guards. Bloody ridiculous. Good God! What freaks! Wind picks up and dark clouds slide in from the northwest. 'Shit. Looks like we're in for one bitch of a storm,' you greet them.

"Looks that way," says the largest of the trio. Each looks like a clone from the other elite force camouflage-wearing commandos that could rip your spine out in three seconds flat. "Come on in before it rains."

The outer door shuts and automatically locks behind you with a rasp of a mechanical bolt. It's a tiny room with only two doors and a security cam.

"Up against the wall, while we search you," says geek two. Good God! What did you get yourself into?

"Uhh. What?"

'We need to search you for weapons or recording devices,' he explains like a brainless automaton who's been through this routine a million times and will a million more.

'Alright,' you reluctantly submit, putting your hands on the whitewashed wall. The center of a nuclear explosion could not be more devoid of life than this tiny room. A ground zero ghost in camo fatigues runs his ethereal hands over your person, up and down the legs, along the torso and waste while the others stand at the ready with full auto weapons. They must make absolute *you* certain you're safe to allow into their top-secret holy chape of death. His hand brushes your inner thigh and against your crotch, not in a perverted manner but with the apathy of a professional who hates doing it. It's tempting to let out a Daffy Duck 'Whooo Hoo Hoo' but you decide against it. Government freaks never can take a joke. And you are trying to get a job, don't forget. Best silence your humor this time.

Another guard waves a metal detecting magical wand over you with more expertise than Tinker Bell. So faeries really do wear boots. Thanks Oz. 'Cleared for entrance,' he barks at the camera above the inner door.

'Escort civilian to reception area A-three,' the female computerish voice replies over the wall speaker as the inner steel door slides open to let you by. Jesus! Damn door must be seven inches thick and solid steel. This must be one bad-assed place, security like this ain't for no reason. Probably some sort of nerve gas production/test facility. Guards stand like statues at various doors along the way. Your guards march you through the halls with only necessary words, no polite conversation. So this is where all those damn taxes go. The elevator takes you and your escorts down six floors to an underground concrete maze.



Finally you stop and a guard swipes a digital ATM-like card into a slot by a door handle. You'll wait in here for your interview. Guard number two tells you. Or is it guard number one? Fuck it, they're all the same.

Mind if I ask what all this security is for? you can't help but be curious.

Sorry, we're under strict orders not to divulge any info. Mr Childers may be awhile, he has other appointments this morning. There are some magazines for you to read while you wait.

Okay, great. I can use some good mindless reading for a change. Well, thanks for bringing me down here.

It's our job, the third one says. Good luck with your interview.

Thanks, you reply as they shut the door and the electronic bolt slides in place, locking you in a room much like the first, except this one has only one door. At least the lights aren't as annoyingly bright. There's a plastic potted plant in a corner, a coffee table with crappy magazines like a doctor's office or a boring person's home, some stupid framed maps on the walls, and several big fat comfy chairs. But the cold, whitewashed brick walls remind you of high school or jail. And somehow a waiting room without coffee isn't much of a waiting room. It's more like sacrifice. Oh well, you need it cut down on the caffeine, make or your neurons will be fried before your fifty. Yeah, right, like they're not already. The magazines usually make the wait slower rather than speed it up. *USA Yesterday*, *Newspuke*, various pamphlets on government research, *Sports Illustrated*. Of course there's no swimsuit issue. Might as well see what good ol' Uncle Sam's doing to battle Ebola, AIDS, drug addiction, the greenhouse effect, and toxic waste while you attempt to ignore the burning gaze of the electric eye camera. Though it would be so much fun to dance around, stick your tongue out, moon the camera, and then sit back down like nothing happened, just to see if they're watching. Good God, man, are you thirty-one or thirteen? Act your age, not your IQ.

The government pamphlets are bursting with dull statistics and facts that any idiot could have compiled. Not a possible solution to the problems mentioned in any of them. Oh sure, they say they're headed in the right directions, but they don't see the problem simply that there's too many damn people. In fifty years there will be ten billion worthless human beings clogging up this planet of yours like cancer cells in a lung. The greenhouse effect and toxic waste are not the diseases, they are the symptoms. Ebola and AIDS are not the diseases, they are the cures. Christ, there you go getting all deep and awful sylph isophical again.

What makes it worse is that billions of dollars are spent prolonging life, life that's shortened by bad health habits. And then people complain that companies manufacture such tempting nonsense as cigarettes, beer, and Ding Dongs for them to spend their money on. Then they sue these big companies when they get cancer. But we must have tobacco, alcohol, and junk food so the government can get its tax money, tax money to support programs to find better ways to prolong life. It's just an endless circle of cash in the quest for eternal life, laziness, and genetic pollution. Is there no one else who sees the comedy?

This room is way too bloody quiet. Jesus, fifty-five minutes already. Where in hell is this dick head? Oh well, better get used to it, he may be another hour or two. Fuck all that noise.

Hello? Tap tap tap, you go at the wall intercom.

We haven't forgotten you, sir. Mr Childers is occupied in one of the labs at the moment. He should be with you in half an hour or so, the voice in the wall reassures you.

Okay. Good. Thank you. Just checking. Shit! Yeah, right. Half an hour your ass.

<Beep, boop, hop, breep, breep> the door lock finally sings its short opera. Clap, clap. Bravo. Bout damn time, a two-hour wait is really pushing your limits. Fucking military bastards think they're so Goddamn better than everyone else.

'Good day. I'm Mike Chiders. Sorry about the wait,' he apologizes and shakes your hand with a big manly ape grip. You feel like going <grunt grunt> at him. His head's shaved so close it could be used for sandpaper. The only non-military thing about this guy is his suit. It's something a Wall Street warrior would feel quite comfortable wearing into battle to determine the worth of the world. Buy. Sell.

'That's okay. I don't mind the wait—no much else to do today. So tell me about the job.' you sit back down in the cushy leather chair. 'I'm anxious to know what it is. All I've been told is that it pays forty-five thousand a year.'

'That's right,' he says while leafing through a file in his lap. 'We can't give out much information because of the volatile nature of our research. That was one reason why we asked you not to discuss the location of the building with anyone. You didn't, did you?' he asks with eyebrows raised in such a way that would make Spock jealous.

'No, I didn't, but why all the secrecy? What do you mean "volatile nature"? The research isn't dangerous, is it?' you eye him suspiciously.

'No, no. Nothing done here is terribly dangerous, just very important from an economic standpoint.'

'Ah! Well that I can understand, but exactly what does the work entail?'

'You'll be studying the levels of fuel exhaust gases using infrared spectroscopy. You have experience with IR and that's why we've chosen to interview you.' You catch a glimpse of your resume as he flips through this huge file with your name on it—probably all the information about you since your birth.

'Okay. What kind of fuel exhaust gases, though? What are they emitting from? Why are they economically important?' 'Shit, this is dull.'

'I'm afraid I can't answer all those questions until you've been through our security inspections, but the gases are common: carbon dioxide, water, ammonia, methane, hydrogen, and some trace gases as well.' Oh joy. So you get to study hot air.

'Ammonia? That's weird. And methane and hydrogen?' you ask surprised. 'The combustion isn't complete. So the machine needs to be more efficient. Simple job. If it's a government machine, then it cannot be made less efficient.'

'Sort of, you're on the right track,' he says visibly impressed.

'Well, I have to use something besides IR to study the levels of hydrogen, but we can deal with that later. But this job sounds fairly simple—it doesn't require someone with a Ph.D. I have quite a bit of experience in theoretical, computational, and electrochemistry that won't be used here. I'm only telling you this because I don't want to be replaced later on by someone who will cost you less money.'

'That's a good point, but we're certain we want someone with a Ph.D. You see, someone who has the discipline to get a Ph.D.—so we've found in the past, is much less likely to leak information. And your talents may not go to waste because new projects open up all the time. So, you, I take the job?' 'Duh.'

'Hell yes. It pays good.' You and he both let out a little laugh. 'But,' you continue, 'How long would it take for a new project to open up? And what about pay raises and benefits?' Look at you, you haven't even got the job and already you want more.

'You're quite ambitious. That can actually be a bad thing around here. You see, our primary goal here is to assimilate information, not to discover, not to invent, not to hypothesize. Jesus! This is ridiculous.'

'Excuse me?' you ask in an incredulous tone. 'What's the purpose of all this then? How can you improve anything if all you do is—'

'It's quite simple, really.' His smug grin is almost unbearable and he presses his fingertips together making you wish you could put Superglue on them. 'That's left for other people to do. That way there is no bias in the research. Furthermore, you will not be working with anyone. This also prevents bias and, more importantly, it's a good security measure. That way if there ever is an information leak we know where it came from. This may sound extreme, but it's very efficient. I know it sounds strange to people new to this kind of system, but it's been done for a long time and been proven to work better than other research programs.' Shit. These freaks are fanatics.

'I see. That's different.' 'Um.' Is it possible that I could move up to analyzing the data instead of just collecting it?

'In time, maybe, but first things first. There's a weeklong security clearance course you have to pass. But that should be easy for you. So you, I still take the job?' he needlessly asks.

'I'll take it,' you agree smiling. 'What other choice do you have? Beats the hell out of being broke. When do I start?'

'Two weeks. I'll have the guards escort you to the orientation room where you'll see a two-hour film. Oh, and there is a three hundred-dollar application, testing, and processing fee. We'll need a money order, but you can bring it with you next time. You may not take notes, but try to remember everything. Welcome aboard.' He gives you another big fat goin' a handshake, slides his card into the door lock, punches the buttons, beep, beep, broop, sha-doop bop-a-top bam boom, and he's gone, just as boring as he came. Now all you have to do is wait some more. Shit. And pay some stupid initiation fee. Fucking bastards. Every instinct tells you to run for it.

Third chaotic day of running your new coffee shop. Non-stop peddling red-hot cheap caffeine buzz to the mindless masses. 'Would you like flavored syrup or whipped cream with that?' you say a million times every morning and night, your two shifts. You'll have to get more help, it's obvious. Amy can't run a register to save her own worthless life. Mick can't work here during the day, he's a professor, after all, and that takes priority over this. Julietta can't work full-time during the day because she has to take care of the kid most of the time. But when she is here at least she knows what she's doing. Anyway, the 'Help Wanted' sign in the window, although not wanted, couldn't be helped.

Mick, being an English professor, is starting a poetry reading here on Tuesday nights. That might bring in a little business. 'Where the hell's that stupid kid who said he'd come in and work today?' He won't be enough. One more pee-on should be enough to keep the place running smoothly during the day when Julietta can't come in. Hopefully these punks won't rip off the register.

'Excuse me,' some old powdered frog in a dress croaks at you.

'Yes, ma'am?' you respond with as much false politeness as possible.

'This latte's still too strong. Could you add a little more milk?'

Certainly. Shit. Fifteen cents worth of milk to keep this fat cow happy and coming back for more. "There you go, ma'am. Hope you like it."

'Yes, your coffee's much better than they have at that place down the block.'

"Glad to hear it. Be sure to tell your friends about us. That's if she has any friends. At least the bitch has decent taste in coffee. Then it is some of Jorge's best, and freshly roasted at his new facility in the city. God. It's your first day of work at the lab and it's ten after seven. Can't be late. Where's that kid? Damn it! Shit. Should you try to call Amy? Might as well. "Ah! So there you are." You put the phone back down. "Show up a little earlier next time, if you don't mind," you growl at the kid.

'Sorry I...' he starts to nervously explain, however

'Look, I don't care what your excuse is. You remember how to run the machines?'

"Yeah, I used to work at

'I remember. You probably got fired for being late, huh?' you grin maliciously at him so he knows you're not all that pissed. "I have to go. Julietta. Be in to help you in an hour or so. See ya."

Outside you stare at the shop for ten seconds. Neon cappuccino sign, pastry menu, a couple of tables by the large windows where an old man in a suit slurps his black liquid drug and scans the sports page. The sign above the sidewalk awning *Awakenings*. The logo next to it: the tarot card Ace of Cups, with a fancy coffee cup, of course. It's good to own things. A shaven dog with a green mohawk down the length of its body sneaks up behind you. God. Poor mutt, its ribs are almost poking out. Probably belongs to one of the homeless punk kids you have to chase out of your shop every other night. You scratch his head and pull a piece of pizza out of the trash for him that he was trying to get then. Lead it down the street away from your place.

First day of work. The underground parking garage is for cars with security clearance only. The tunnel entrance is three blocks away from the building. God, Amy's car sucks. You'll have to get your own soon. Roll down window, nod hello to parking lot guards, show them ID. Park car. Insert magnetic card into main entrance lock. Enter access code. Door opens. Repeat with second door. Door opens. Check in at reception window. Mr. Childers comes out and shakes your hand, wearing an even nicer suit than the one he had on when you met him, proving once and for all that the clothes do not make the man. Wha, a geek.

'All ready to go see your project?' he asks, still gripping your hand.

"Better believe it." you smile with false enthusiasm and barely manage to get your hand back in one piece. You need a joy buzzer.

"Ah, yes," he goes on yacking as the two of you head for the elevator down into the underground bunker. "I think you'll find it unusual, but I hope you like it."

Probably some kind of mode-prototype rocket," you guess.

'Uh...no, not exactly, you see.

Hold on, let me guess. A new super-efficient, fuel-saving car engine?" you try again. "Maybe something I should buy stock in, eh?" you wink.

'You could guess forever and still not get it. You see, there are economic considerations in areas you could never dream of. Some of them blah blah blah blah.' He could put Rakeyser to sleep.

The elevator arrives, he swipes his card (you can't even open a Goddamn closet around this place without first swiping a card through a magnetic reader), then you swipe yours.

'Too bad these things don't spit out money like an ATM,' you interrupt his golden speech. He laughs and continues on about 'potential practical aspects of common every-day items in ways that most people would never imagine and here at this almost unlimited research facility we study...' On and on he goes. God! Can this guy shut up or what?

Marching through featureless corridors as quiet as a mausoleum, except for your footsteps and his yacking, he leads you to your new lab. Your new lab—you will be the only scientist on the project. Other scientists from other labs occasionally scuttie past with a brief timid nod, he is, much the same way a dog that's beaten every day bows its head and tucks its tail, acknowledging the superiority of its psychotic master.

Once again you ask about future opportunities that might open up for you to analyze data rather than just collect it all day.

"I'll give you a little advice," he puts his arm around you all friendly and father-like. "Just immerse yourself in your work, follow directions, and good things will happen. But for now, you've worked for awhile on your father's farm when you were younger, right?"

"What? That was over fifteen years ago. How?"

"That was one reason we chose you for this job. In spite of your... shall we say... turbulent youth."

"You guys do your homework, huh?" you ask, visibly impressed with how well they've researched your past. But what does farm work have to do with?

"Open the door," he instructs you at the entrance to your lab, and you do, see.

"Okay, great. Let's see what all this is about." You dig your card out and swipe it through the magnetic reader. Wait a minute... that smell.

<Bleep beep bop bob broop> the keys sound off as you punch in your code and the person at the other end of the camera circuit makes sure you are who your ID card says you are. The green light goes on and <Ka-chunk> the door slides by to let you into your lab. Repeat the process with the second door. That smell, so familiar. <Ka-chunk>

<Moooooood> go seven cows and two bulls at you. The sound reverberates in the huge basketball-court-sized room filled with cattle pens on one side and lab equipment on the other. For a few seconds you stand there with your mouth hanging open.

"What the f---?!" you scream. "I'm doing research on *these*?" you jump about pointing at the stupid domesticated bovines like someone who has discovered in the morning that their car won't stay on the ground. Mr. Childers stares at you even more blankly than the cows. The scene has all the makings for at least a hundred *Far Side* cartoons.

"Yes, you'll study the dietary intake of these extremely economically important farm animals and how that relates to their gaseous products, what the products are composed of, and how much there is. You were told the work may be unusual. If there are any problems we'll be happy to let you go with no obligations."

Forty five thousand a year. Forty five thousand a year. Forty five thousand a year.

"No. No problems. I'm just... surprised. Very surprised. How could studying... cow gas, you can't help but chuckle... be economically..." you stop yourself from asking because you know he won't tell you why. That would jeopardize your unbiased attitude toward the research. Nevermind. I'll need several more FTIR spectrometers and I'll need to get these cows isolated from each other during... gas sampling, you chuckle again. And I'll need a constant input of fresh air into each cow's stall to simulate natural conditions and also prevent gas buildup. And to keep you from inhaling this awful stench.

"Good, good," he appreciatively smiles. "You had me worried for a second. Supplies and maintenance requests can be handled with form A-eighty-six. You'll find all that in your desk with a description of what each form is for. Sorry the ventilation systems aren't quite up to handling this, but we're having maintenance work on it."

"Okay. Can't do much until then, we'll need something better to study how much gas is coming from each animal. No point in trying to get any data today. How long have you had these cows and what have they been eating?"

<Moooooo. Moooooo. Mooooooooooo> As if to answer you, a chorus of lowing beasts interrupts from their makeshift pens in this huge gymnasium-sized room. You try to get the picture of cows playing basketball out of your head and sit down behind your desk. Mr. Childers sits opposite from you.

All the specs on the animals, as well as feeding, care, and waste disposal methods are in this folder here. We have a vet if you need one," he offers.

'Great. I'll run the spectrometers through some tests and see how they handle gas samples. If you want continuous data collection we'll need one for every animal. But that may not be necessary.

'Well, I'm glad to see you get into your work. Anything you need you can fill out a request for. And if you find any problems let me know right away.'

<Mooooo.> The cows stare at you, making you feel as if it's you that being observed and tested, not them. Stupid cows.

"Will do," you say as you walk him to the door.

<Bleep beep beep hoop hop> the door sings as he enters the code to exit the lab.

<Moooooooooooo. Moooooooo.> The chorus sings.

You stare the stupid beasts down. 'My God! How did I get myself into this shit?' Cow gas. I'm studying the emission of cow gas. I've got a Ph.D. in physical chemistry and I'm... I'm... A trickle of strong smelling urine slides across the concrete floor to a drain just by your feet. 'I am now a great pioneering scientist!' you proudly proclaim to the group of animals stinking up the place. 'I am now the world's first bovine fartologist!' Then you see it: a camera up in the ceiling, watching your every move, a mic listening to everything you say. 'Shit!' 'Uh, heh heh, just kidding.' you apologize to the electric eye, hoping it's not watching/listening. 'Shit.' They'll fire you for sure if they saw that little outburst. Maybe. 'Shit!' Forty-five thousand a year. You'd better at least act like you're taking the job seriously and get to work.

Cigarette smoke fills the room creating a mystical shroud around the fluorescent lights above the ceiling fans. The loud *Whoosh!* and *Shlurp!* of the cappuccino machine steaming the milk cuts through the music for a few seconds. You give a silent, but heartfelt apology to Jimmy Hendrix. Two people are playing chess and smoking exactly three point two cigarettes apiece per hour. You need a cigarette machine in here. A group of pierced weirdoes, freaks, and hippies discuss the obscure nature of reality. Of course it's obscure, you idiots, if you do drugs all day long even reality seems no longer real. A physics study group crams for an exam. Not a bad crowd for the third week open. Dump the spent coffee grinds, wipe up the cabinet. Easy extra income. Fun too. <Ring>

'Awakenings Coffeehouse,' you say in the phone. 'Til four a.m. Or until the crowd dies out. That's right. Thanks. Bye.'

Abhh, it's good to be in charge. And in charge of your life, as well. Job's going smooth. Du', but smooth. Every day you come in at six thirty to open shop at seven. Then go to work in the city by eight. Every other night you work seven to midnight. Other nights you go to the gym, go home and screw Amy. No Stress. Not like at grad school. This's the life.

Alright now, what in hell is this stupid research for? Cow farts? Economically important? It still gives you a chuckle. Economically important Mr Childers said. Why? Is there a relation between the amount or type of each gaseous component (i.e. methane, hydrogen, ammonia, carbon dioxide, water, etc.) and the cows' growth or milk production? Or perhaps the flatulence relates to the fertility of the animals. But how would that be tested. Perhaps someone's doing other tests on these cows that you don't know of. Now you're getting paranoid. And if flatulence composition indicates anything important it would be after the fact: farts are a mundane byproduct, an effect, not a cause. And the gas can't possibly be useful or valuable enough in and of itself to warrant collecting and studying it. Can it? You'll have to research this further on your own. Time to do some library work.

But anyway, each cow tends to make the same amount of gas. Bulls make more, but in



relation to the weight of the animals, the gas volume is about the same. Next week they start a new diet - no corn. Must keep careful control of the variables. This has got to be the most idiotic thing you've ever done in your entire life. Well - at most. At least it pays. And how! Forty five thou a year, forty five thou a year, forty five thou a year - you keep repeating the mantra to keep yourself sane.

<Shwhooooosh!> the cappuccino machine goes again, forcing the high-pressure hot water through the finely ground coffee. There's barely even enough room for the makeshift stage in your tiny coffee shop. The poet at the microphone waits for you to finish so the noise won't interfere with her art. 'Art, they call this?' How pathetic! 'Prosaic Prozac blues, well-articulated griping soap-box comedy - any of these, yes, but art?' Puh-leeze!

I may be a woman, but I am not weak - the fem-nazi poet begins her ravings. You turn away so no one sees you laugh. Especially Mick, he takes this shit seriously. All it means to you is more customers. You clap along with the crowd when she finishes, then make yourself another decaf latte. Decaf. Who would've ever thought you'd drink the shit. Ah well - too much stress on the bod is not a good thing. A month and a half without much caffeine. You haven't felt this relaxed in years. Work's easy (though idiotic), you're in control of your life (though you'd like more out of it) and you'll be damned if your relationship with Amy isn't getting better. Marriage? You? Who knows?

The lights are dimmed up during the ten-minute break before the second set of poetry. A group of people comes up for refills on coffee or cappuccino or latte or whatever. A few buy cigarettes out of the machine. Money, money, money, money. Money's life.

Three young boys sit at a back table in a dark corner laughing at the poetry and loudly make fun of the poets. 'Jeez, even you have better taste than that.' But then they also insult each other and even themselves. And they're writing. Poets insulting poets? Typical human nature. The one writing the most furious y gets up and comes over to the counter. His dark eyes focus directly on yours, but seem to move in a mill on directions at once. The simplest task requires his utmost concentration to complete - making him seem all the more intense. He hands you a quarter with his mechanized prosthetic left hand for what must be the fifteenth time tonight. He taps the fingers of his artificial appendage on the counter like he's proud of it - like it's a trophy. 'Refill,' he orders. You fill the dumb bastard's cup, hoping he dies of ulcers. No, that would cut back on business. Oh well. He grins like a lunatic and takes the cup from you without even a 'thank you' as his hand closes around the hot cup with a barely audible turning of gears. That cheesy bit of cosmetic enhancement probably cost twenty grand at least. He goes down the counter to get cream and sugar then walks over to his friends again. And people think crack is addictive. Little twerp. At least he's a regular customer - weirdoes give coffeehouses their appeal. And have you got your fair share of them. The profits are still pretty lame though. This place needs a gimmick.

The exponentially decaying sinusoidal wave of the interferogram pops up on the computer screen. The interferometers' optics undergo auto-alignment to maximize the signal. The Bruker IFS One Twenty HR - the Ferrari of IR spectrometers. Tubular air ducts come from each of the cows and bulls stalls, giving a steady supply of fresh air and taking out the stale air to be analyzed alternately from cow to cow every five minutes. This is stupid, but what the hell - it pays. The IFS One Twenty is fast enough to handle a lot that it has super-high resolution - it gives higher quality spectra, it has step-scan capabilities, and its computer has great games on it. You made sure to set the instrument's computer screen facing away from the security video cam. What a waste of a fine instrument - cow farts and video games!

Of course the amounts and types of gases emitted depend on what the cows eat, their water intake, etc. The correlations aren't all that impressive. How does all this relate to milk or meat production? Or maybe something else of economic importance?

Oh well, that's not your bull to ride. You walk over to one of the cows' pens, open the door, bend under it, and squirt a little milk in your decaf. What do you call a cow that's just had a baby? De-calf-inated. Bad. Hmm... these studies might show more effects with calves. You'll have to ask your boss, Mike Chiders. Nah, he'd just get pissed that you're actually thinking about the work. You're not supposed to think here, don't forget. Just as well: every database you have access to has turned up negative for info on how flatulence could be an indicator of anything important. There was plenty of info on water pollution from farm animal waste though. And to think it could be used as fertilizer or stored in vats for methane production. God! Humans are so wasteful. Fuck it. You don't own a stockyard, nothing you can do about it. Of course Mike Chiders wouldn't be happy about you looking for sources on cow flatulence, that would ruin your unbiased opinion. Fuck him!

"Three-hundred twenty-seven dollars," Mick counts the money from the previous day. Not bad. However... deduct salaries, rent, cost of goods, repairs, insurance, taxes, etc. Still in the hole. Shit! There's no hope for this place. Not to mention it takes up too much damn time.

"We need to put that kitchen to better use, damn it. I mean, we fixed it up and we're hardly doing anything with it. I'm telling ya, if we get a cook and start selling meals, maybe breakfast and simple lunch items to start with, we'll bank. Or at least break even." you tell Mick for the hundredth time, knowing he won't listen to common sense.

But to do that takes capital. He calmly explains as if you didn't know that already. "That's capital, I'm not willing to put up, and we're supposed to be in this fifty-fifty. Look at it this way: at least it will be a good tax write-off."

"Tax write-off!?" you stand up from the wooden chair, knocking it over and lean over the table to get in his face. "Look you dumb bastard, when we went into this the idea was to **make** money, **not** lose it! And those quaint little pastries in that cabinet hardly make a cent and they're too damn expensive. We need real food that college kids can afford. I mean, sure we make a helluva profit off the coffee, but not enough to keep this place above water. And we are not in this fifty-fifty. I've got a much larger stake in this than you. I'm gonna start looking for a cook. Hey Thomas, you know any good cooks looking for a job?" you say to the kid getting the place cleaned up for the Sunday morning crowd.

"Nah, but I'll look around."

"Not right away, you won't," Mick cuts in. "This is *our* coffeehouse, don't forget. And we make the decisions, not you, not me, but *we*."

"I've sunk thirty thousand in this stinking hole. I've got a helluva lot more to lose than you. And it's my expertise, connections, and work (lots of it) that even keeps this place afloat. Don't fuck with me."

"I'm sorry, but I'd rather have a tax write-off than the income. If you'd listen to me, you could really use this to your advantage. You make forty-five thousand a year at your other job; you could use a tax break yourself, you know."

"Listen, dumbass, with a cook I figure this place can pull in thirty to fifty thou a year without one we can save around four or five thou on taxes. Do the math or get out of the business."

"All the same, this's our store: no cook unless I say so."

"You'll regret this," you warn him, then walk to the bathroom before opening shop.

Do these Goddamn kids do nothing with their wasted lives except write filth all over your bathroom walls? How can you fix this? <Zip Tinkle tinkle> Pass a law banning magic markers? Pass a law banning kids from your shop? Get a key for the bathroom. Maybe. Some idiot wrote a message about his penis. How lovely. Great, now you, I have to spend twenty bucks to fix the bathroom. More cash down the drain. Shake shake shake. <Zip Flush> Weekends suck. Goddamn this stupid coffee shop. You're starting to regret the day you had your first coffee. If you could remember back that far. Shit, this place reeks. You peek in the crapper. No Wonder. fucking retards can't even flush the Goddamn john.

Eight point three ppm of ammonia in the cows' gaseous product when they're fed on high protein grain. Looks good. You've almost got your report finished. The initial report is fairly simple, but the final one will blow Mike Childers away. 'like a fart'. There are references, charts, and possible ways different gases could indicate milk and meat production. The solid and liquid waste matter are much more reliable indicators though. And a good deal of gaseous product comes from those as well. It's a gutsy maneuver, but if this doesn't get you a promotion, nothing will. You turn up the tape player louder. Too kicks ass.

When *Sober* is over you march over to the door, papers and overhead slides tucked under your arm, swipe your card through the magnetic reader, beep your way out of the lab farm and into the government labyrinth. It's about a five-minute walk to the presentation room. Mr. Childers and eight other people you've never met before admit you inside. Look at you, all dressed up in nice slacks, ironed shirt, new tie, shined shoes, and ready to tell them what you've discovered over the last seven plus months. What you've discovered about cow farts. You almost snicker, except that you're used to it. You introduce yourself, shaking hands with everyone, sipping your decaf to wet the back of your throat for the long speech ahead and to wash down a blueberry donut. To be cute you set a small pitcher of fresh squeezed milk over by the crappy coffee maker for anyone who'd like a gourmet's touch. But nothing in this world can help *Hi Is Bros*, with maybe the exception of donuts, which there are plenty of. Luckily you've got your own coffee, a new decaf blend that Jorge sent to you.

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, you begin. As you no doubt already know, the purpose of this research is to study the amounts and composition of gaseous products of bovine farm animals. The main gaseous products are carbon dioxide and water, from the cows' respiration, and methane, hydrogen, and ammonia from their bodily waste. These things are, of course, related to the food the animals eat, but the major obstacle is isolating exactly how much of each gaseous product is emanating from which bodily function. There's respiration, eructation or burping, defecation, urination, and flatulence. It was a simple matter to isolate the feces and urine to test the gases coming from them. However, to test the flatulence, a tube was developed from a typical household clothes dryer and attached over the animal's rear during the sampling. You expect a few chuckles when you put up the diagram on the overhead projector. No such luck. Tough audience. You continue. A simple fan mechanism blows the gas through the duct and to the IR spectrometer. A similar device is used to test the animals' respiration and eructation products, mainly carbon dioxide, water, and methane. Except that the sampling duct is simply connected to the animal's Plexiglas encased pen, while the rear half of the animal is isolated from the front via plastic curtains duct taped to the animal's body. There is a slight change in the gas composition from when the cow's chewing is ended to when it is not. But I'll go over that in a minute. Any questions before I present the results?

Everyone looks at each other without a word. Until

Yes, I'd like to ask a question, some skinny little bespectacled nerd speaks up with his

hand raised like he was fresh out of high school.

'Certainly you're eager to slap him down and get on with it.'

'You've mentioned the major types of gases, but aren't there any others that would be present in trace amounts?' Ann asks, for example.

'Yes, there certainly are. But there aren't any strong correlations between them and any of the controlled variables. I was going to save it for the last part of my discussion unless you feel I should go into it right away. I have no idea what you're looking for or what's important.'

'No, that's fine. I'll wait. Please continue.' He scribbles a few things in his notepad.

'Anyone else?' Okay. The blah blah blah blah blah blah. On and on it goes for two-and-a-half hours. First you describe how each type of feed produces different amounts of gas and how that relates to the weight increase of the animal, milk production, the fat content of the cows' milk, and finally the bull's sperm count and motility. Then you show them bar graphs indicating the amounts of trace gases produced with each type of feed. Next you show them all the literature references you dug up at the university library and how your results relating feed and animal growth confirm what others have found. With the disappointing looks on everyone's faces, you think you've just cost them a million dollars.

'You realize,' Mike Childers breaks the silence, 'that because you've brought in these outside sources that you've biased your own opinion?'' He folds his arms across his chest and leans back in his chair while everyone else nods in agreement, nothing but a pack of yes-men.

'Well, I would have done the same research regardless of the literature. Look, I laid out the scheme of how I'd do the research even before I found these references. And, believe me, the amount of material is sparse. Look, twelve papers total, three of them in German, one Russian, one French, and I can't even read them.' You have to talk over the <Clunk, clunk> of Mr. Childers rudely stirring his Goddamn cheap coffee.

Okay. We've seen enough of the results and they probably do. Now ladies and gentlemen, you'll have to excuse us while I debrief our young scientist on his new project.' Mr. Childers tells everyone else.

You beam with a smile, hoping for the best. Anything will be better than those Goddamn cows. I hope this project is a little more chemistry-oriented than the last.

Not exactly. He smiles a most sadistically as he beeps himself and you out into the hallway. 'We'll discuss this in my office. Did you catch the Bulls-Laker game Saturday?' he makes small talk as you walk to the elevators on your way to the main part of the building. You almost wince at the word 'bull.'

'Not all of it. I was helping my business partner blah blah blah.'

As you get off the elevator a voice comes over the intercom: "Mike Childers please report back to the conference room."

'Damn it. Guard!' Escort this civilian to the reception area,' he orders a guard who's standing idle. 'I'll be back in a minute to show you your new project.'

Okay. No problem, you tell him, wishing you could just get the hell on with it.

"Did you catch the Bulls game Saturday?" the guard asks.

So you sit outside the reception window in a hard plastic chair and make with the old thumb twiddle. The reception window is a bulletproof glass cage much like a drive-thru bank or a Burger King. A little old uniformed guy inside monitors all the security cameras, ready to order troops to wherever they need to be. Colonel Grandma Gadaffi. Oddly there are no cameras around. They must think the area is so secure that they don't need cameras. She calls one of the ever-present guards over to watch you while she goes to the bathroom. <Clack clack clack> her heels go down the hallway. Ho hum, thumb twiddle. Shit, this is dull. Can't you find anything

better to read?

'Security breach on sub-level twenty six. There's a bull loose in the hallway. Guards eighteen through twenty-three report immediately.' the intercom announces.

'Shit. Stay right here and don't move,' the guard tells you.

Of course the second he rounds the corner you stand up and walk around. Well you'll be a sonuvabitch! The door to the control/reception area's ajar. Through the glass window you see a bank of thirty or so video screens. On one of them you can see the bull enjoying its moment in the sun. On another you see Mr. Chuders and the group you just left. Damn, too bad you can't hear what they're saying. But then

"I'm telling you this subject is too damn rebellious, he'll never just do what you tell him with no questions asked. Look at his psychic profile. Look at his history. We've been studying him for over seven months now while he thinks he's studying cows and

'I'll break him yet. You'll see the how potent the power of money can be,' Mr. Chuders responds, underestimating you.

'We'll give you eight more months and that's it. This's costing too much. We need scientists with absolute obedience to work on project M-sixty-seven and this screening process is taking too long when we've got a string of other potential candidates. Why is this one so important?'

"You don't understand the politics involved. You see."

<Clack clack clack> you hear the heels again. switch off the sound, dart out the door and sit back down just as she rounds the corner.

'What were you doing up and where is the guard?' she asks you with her hand on an emergency alarm switch by the door to her station.

"Oh, he's trying to catch a bull that got loose on sub-level twenty six. That's Oscar, he was one of my test animals for the project I just finished. I guess he got loose when they tried to transfer the animals somewhere else. Check him out." you point through the window at the video screen on the far right.

She looks through her glass station window and smiles. "You don't have authorization to be watching these monitors. Stay seated," she tells you.

So this whole time it was you who was being tested. Shit! These fucking bastards. What the hell is project M-sixty-seven? Fuck it. This shit's too hairy and scary like a moldy bloody Mary served up by Dracula. You'd best burn rubber, boy. Get the hell out of Dodge. Fly the coop. Get the fuck out while you still can. Maybe. If only the money wasn't so damn good and your curiosity not so high.

You slam the apartment door behind you with enough force to shake the entire building the cheap cardboard structure that it is.

'Jesus H. Christ!' Amy yells from the bedroom. 'What the hell are you trying to do?'

You don't respond and simply rip your suit off as fast as you can and pack your gym shorts in a duffel bag. She doesn't say another word, she's seen you like this too many times. Goddamn assholes treat you like a fucking guinea pig and then demote you to this new job. And you had to sit there and take it or get fired. Forty five thousand a year, forty five. fuck it all, it's not worth it. But then, Goddamn it! How else are you gonna support yourself? Shit, motherfucker! And those bastards want you to. You can't bear to think about this new project. This is worse than the cow fart project. A hundred times more ignorant. For a second you sit on the side of the bed rubbing your temples. It's sure nice when Amy massages your shoulders. She's always been there. She may not be the world's smartest or hardest working, but she's

always there for you

Thanks hon. you kiss her hand "I'll be back later. If those assholes from the coffee shop call tell them to go fuck themselves. I'm at the gym."

"Want me to go in to work for you?" she unbelievably asks

"Yeah, that'd be great." Maybe there's hope for her after all.

About forty giant overhormonized freakazoids press, push, and pull bumps of steel in time to the oldies station, which don't really play oldies unless you consider a song thirty years old to be an oldie, which you don't. You join them and sweat along. Jesus, you once loved your work, now it all seems like a farce. Those bastards at the coffee shop don't appreciate you. Those bastards at the lab are making you jump through psychological hoops just to see if you can hack it. At least things are cool with Amy, unless. Nah, she's always been faithful. Maybe. Still, your paranoid suspicions get the better of you, as they always do. But then, considering they're usually correct, why fight them?

Bench press, dips, flies, leg press, leg extensions, leg curls, leg lifts, crunches. StairMaster. StairMasterBater alligator sharp teeth snap clap trap up down pant sweat pant breathe level eleven heaven twenty-five minute run, for life, however long that will last. Thinking of the past few months puts you in a lizzy, making you slightly dizzy, like an unending spiral staircase that's laced with acid rain. No pain, no gain. But then it's really not all that confusing if you go back and think about it one more time. You're just not in control of circumstances yet. Oh, but you will be. First you'll have to put that asshole partner of yours in his place. But how? Not to worry, you'll figure it out. And that Goddamn job of yours, what the hell is that all about? You could just march right into Mike Childers' office and tell him you know what's up and to either put you on a real project, right away, or he can go fuck himself. It would sure beat the hell out of this new project you're working on. Jesus, there you go thinking about that again. It's not like it can be helped though. Forty-five thousand a year, forty-five thousand a year, forty-five thousand. Not worth it. But you have to make a living. No, it's not living, it's just existence. It takes a little more persistence to get up and go the distance. Thanks, Dr. Peart. But for now, you better calm down, til something better shows up.

Shower, put jeans back on. Say bye to all the muscle heads. Scrape the frost off your window. The eight-year-old Toyota starts like a charm. Fuck new cars! Who needs 'em? Who needs 'em except for spoiled rotten bitches, little old ladies, and assholes with an ego trip?

Amy punches keys on the register to ring up an old guy's espresso and cheesecake. You stand outside and stare in through the window for a minute. *Awakenings*, it's a tiny little shop, but big enough to handle the modest crowds you get. Cigarette smoke fills the room, as usual for the night crowd. Smoke, smoke, smoke. Smoke everywhere. God, that's fucking gross. You'll have to get a better ventilation system. Students and freaks and vuppies and nerds, typical coffeehouse crowd. Each little clique has its own turf staked out. The vuppies sit toward the front, where the nicer booths are and the smoke isn't so dense. The freaks and weirdoes sit in the back, where it's darker and they can write on the tables and walls, making drug deals and hemp jewelry. Most of the order crowd sits at the bar, where it's safer and more sophisticated looking, reading newspapers or the *Walden Journal*. You're almost proud of Amy and the kids working with her, the way they've got everything under control. Man, if you get a cook to work in the kitchen, this place will be packed. Right now it's only half full, or half empty.

"Hi, hon," you greet Amy.

"Oh, hey baby. You feelin' better?" she asks and gives the customer his change.

"Much better. Hi, guys," you greet the hired help and they return the courtesy. "Hey Tom,



you hear anything about a decent cook yet?"

"Nah, not yet. Try puttin' an ad in the paper," he suggests.

"Yeah, I just might have to. Oh well, it'll be twenty bucks well spent."

"Hon, I thought Mick didn't want you to get a cook yet."

"I know, babe, but once that idiot sees how much business a cook can bring in, everything will be fine. You'll see. If he'd help out around here once in a while, besides that fucking poetry crap, I might listen to him, but f' he ain't gonna help, to hell with him. Anyway, looks like things are gettin' slow, so let's get home. These gents can clean up and I gotta get up early for work tomorrow. I'm starting a new project. Sort of."

"Whatcha mean, sort of?" B, I, one of the faithful customers, asks.

"Never mind, you wouldn't believe the stupid crap I do at work. Well, you used to be in the military, maybe you would. Stinking government jobs."

"Okay, hon, I'm ready." Amy throws her apron in the laundry bag on top of some dish towels.

You run to the bathroom in the back real quick, just to keep an eye on the scumbags lounging back in the rear booths. There aren't too many of them on weeknights, which is good. The bathroom's in shabby shape—new writing on the wall, piss puddles under the urinal, a dead cockroach in the sink. Love-y. When you walk out you tell A.J. to get it cleaned up. There's too many damn people running this place and too few seeing what needs to be done. —one— you! If it was just you and Amy, you could do it all yourselves. But no time for that.

Hon, Amy says as you walk out with her in the cool night air. "I know the work you do is top-secret, but it's not dangerous, is it?"

To tell you the truth, you whisper to Amy, they're putting me through tests to see if I'm good enough. But they don't know that I know it. I have no idea what the actual work is that they do. Oh, while it's on my mind: When you go shopping tomorrow, spare no expense—pick up two of the best sirloin steaks you can find."

<Crash!> Measure <Crash!> Measure <Crash!> Measure <Crash!> Measure. God, this is so fucking stupid. <Crash!> Measure. Ninety-nine thousand nine hundred to go. Shit! There's no way in hell you will get through all this. <Crash!> Measure. Not with your sanity still intact. Not in under a year. A year of doing this. <Crash!> Measure. Shit! One hundred thousand divided by two hundred per day equals five hundred days. You'll have to speed up. Measure all morning and input the data into a computer for performing mathematical, statistical analyses all afternoon. And for what? "Practical applications of chaos theory in patterns manifested in semi-random ceramic fracturing," the asshole Mike Chiders had the audacity to tell you. Motherfucker's the biggest. <Crash!> Measure.) bulb shatter you've ever encountered. Breaking cheap ceramic disks, measuring the pieces, looking for patterns via statistical analysis. Looking through a scanning tunneling electron microscope for the meaning of life in a speck of fly dung. Forty-five thousand dollars, forty-five thousand dollars, forty-five thousand dollars. <Crash!> Measure. The breaking part isn't so bad—it's the measuring business that borders on intolerable. There's the arc length, the angles from the edge, the number of corners along the break, the length of the break edge, etc. Measuring the vaguely pie-wedge-shaped pieces takes two-and-a-half minutes while hitting the disk with the same force in the same position takes only a few seconds. Creation takes forever, destruction takes an only an instant. Duh. Well, the universe being an exception. Maybe.

If only the cocksuckers would've let you bring in a tape player—anything to block out the mindless <Crash!> Measure.) tedium, the glaring light, the white washed walls, and the

cramped little room, which wouldn't be so cramped if it weren't for the stacks of disks taking up eighty percent of the space. They're stacked up almost to the ceiling and go back about thirty feet. You haven't decided which is worse: the stacks of disks that seem to be watching you or the vid-cam that is. Forty-five thousand, forty-five thousand, forty-five thousand. Aummmmmmm.

The second you open the screen door of the coffee shop the greasy odor of bacon and eggs about knocks you over. And makes your stomach growl. Six thirty a.m. The cook is making himself a quick bite to eat before you open up at seven. You might gripe about the extra expense, but over the past few weeks he's proven himself worth more than a mere seven dollars and twenty-five cents an hour. Eight different burgers, ten different sandwiches, pancakes of a dozen flavors, salads, quiche, omelets, a different dessert every day, etc., etc.

You can't believe you'd actually stoop this low, selling greasy breakfast artery-clogging slime at the coffee shop that's always been your life's dream. Or almost always. At least the place is starting to make a profit now, so that's one less stress factor in your life. At this rate the restaurant should net twenty-five G's a year. And that's being conservative. The best part about the cook is that he keeps the kitchen cleaned up. Maybe you should bring him over to your apartment.

"Want anything?" Luke offers and points at the grill that's barely sizzling from the eggs over easy and bacon he just fixed.

"Nah, no time. I'll just grab some toast and a juice."

"No offense, but you look like shit. You need a good breakfast."

"What I need is a new job. Why don't you teach me how to cook?"

"Cause then I'd be out of a job. Heh, heh."

"Yeah, you smile back. I guess you're right. I should eat something. Fix me, fix me whatever you're havin'. Smells great. And unhealthy, but who wants to live forever?"

So you munch away while opening the register. The bus boy/dish washer comes in. Two waitresses come in. Customers come in and pack the tiny place. This is more like it, you smile, hating the fact that you have to leave and go break more disks, but at least it's money. Amy comes in to help with the register. At least she can keep an eye on the money so none of the employees try to pull a fast one. One less thing to worry about.

So on and on life proceeds, time falls away like blood from a stab victim, leaving a trail behind him as he stumbles down the sidewalk, death advances, and chaos dances around order like flies around you, you know the saying. Mick can't do a damn thing about the cook, you own the majority of the coffee shop, sixty-two percent, enough to give you control. Now Mick only shows up once in a while for free coffee and on Tuesday nights to host the poetry reading which about doubles the crowd for a few hours. But that's a crowd you could do without; they hardly ever spend a dime. Cheap-assed artists. Amy's learned how to support herself running a register. She saves you about two hundred dollars a week. The most beneficial thing about it is that now you've got time to rest, workout, or read up on the latest chemistry trends. There's a new smectic B phase liquid crystal derived polymer that's like a composite on the molecular level, a single phase composite. Fascinating. You could research that at home and pull a few strings at the chem. dept. to use their analytical instruments. Nah. Amy would defecate emerald-colored mass-produced synthetic cream-filled sponge cakes to arrive home and find the kitchen turned into a chem. lab. You need to go into business for yourself, none of this relying on a paycheck from those government clowns. But a business, a real business, the coffeehouse is a joke, requires assets. And assets require time. And planning. You'll be rich soon, relax.

I am the shadow beneath everyone, the silhouette on the wall,

watching your lives emerge from a sea of lust and vanish into nothing but

dust that is itself a sea

And all that remains are the poetry paintings, and formulae

Form your life carefully

I am the judge, jury and prison guard

"An execution, swift and painless, you want."

Out of the question

For then where would I have to live?

And what would I do?

Seven hundred fourteen dollars and change you count the final dollar from the coffee shop's daily sales. Not bad. And it's all because of the cook. He can turn a few eggs into a gourmet meal. A dollar's worth of food, labor, and equipment can be turned into three bucks. You'll have to give him a raise soon. No big deal. At his rate you should be able to pull in about forty G's a year off the coffee shop. Of course Mick will have to get his cut, thirty-eight percent. But you and Amy earn salaries as managers to increase your own profits. There's no way in hell you'll give Mick his full share if he doesn't help out that fat, lazy, worthless poetry pig.

<Crash!> Measure. It's a most relaxing, breaking ceramic disks and measuring the pieces. Oh, at first you hated it, but after a few weeks it became tolerable. Just let your mind wander, falling into a state of Zen meditation. It was the chanting to yourself that did it, you're a most certain. Forty-five thousand dollars a year. Atummmmm. Mantric crash. Power and control, calm and sedation, clarity of mind you find where others have failed, impaled to the belief that their accomplishments will matter. If they'd discover a cure for AIDS, invent a new Cracker Jack toy, or wipe out an endangered species, it's all equal in the eyes of God because God is blind. If he/she/it/they exist's. Oh, that's so deep. Ah well. Now it's time to go talk to Cow-fart Childers.

The glare from the lamp over the big office desk is almost as obnoxious as your boss behind it. The Ansel Adams prints of winter landscapes on the wall make the place even colder. Frozen nature frozen again by photographic skill more precise than a surgeon's blade cutting a two-D slice out of the third and fourth dimensions and preserving it like a butterfly in a museum showcase. Dull.

'You must be doing something wrong.' Mike Childers insinuates.

'Doing something wrong?' I take an iron weight with a pointed end, set it at the same height on top of a gaudy mechanism each time, let it fall onto the disk directly in the center, and I'm supposed to see a pattern in the data from the fractured pieces.' You said this relates to chaos theory. Have you never heard of the butterfly effect? There will be no pattern. The fractures are entirely random because of microscopic defects in the ceramic material. Look, get me out of this crap and onto a real project. You know what I'm talking about.' That was a big risk you just took. He eyes you suspiciously across his large desk and you return the defiant stare. The scene is like two armies at war staring across a piece of covered land.

There's you'd be a pattern in some of the data, that's all I can tell you. Maybe you don't have what it takes to find the pattern we're looking for, which is fine, but if you don't keep collecting the data we'll have to let you go.

After a few seconds of tense silence you stand up and walk out without a goodbye or see ya later. So the bastard wants to see how you react under pressure. Well, let's show him.

*Are you sure you want to delete these files?* the computer message reads. Thirty-six thousand fifty-eight data sets stand ready to be thrown off the silicon cliff into the electric canyon of no return. Jesus, three-and-a-half months of work, stupid as it is, thirteen thousand plus dollars worth of your time on the brink of termination. You left click the mouse pointer on the cancel icon, you just can't do it. The spreadsheet pops back up with rows and columns of meaningless numbers. Each break in a ceramic disk starts directly in the center. So of course the edge length of each piece is a little longer than the disk's radius. That's for the pie-wedge breaks only. No surprise. The number of sloppy-y-cut-pizza-looking pieces from a break varies from as few as two to as many as eight. Chips and small pieces are disregarded. Hmmm, perhaps you

shouldn't treat the data collectively. Perhaps you should segregate the data somehow. Smaller data sit in the back of the bus, please. And don't let the sun set on your ass in *this* town, zero.

It takes a couple of hours to separate each row into data from disks that break into different numbers of pieces. And the pieces aren't always pie-wedge shaped. Once that's done you take an average of the arc lengths and... Well, you'll be a son-of-a-bitch. Is that it? All this work for something so idiotic? Double the arc length from the smallest piece and it about equals the arc length of the second largest piece, triple it, and it about equals the third, and so on. This is real approximate, of course. The standard deviation is huge, almost one third of the respective arc length is. So let's do a regression analysis on this and go turn the mess in. It takes awhile for the computer to do its thing. The best-fit line isn't linear. It equals  $x$  to the power of zero point eight seven two six nine. The data set from disks that break in four pieces reveals a similar graph with an exponent of zero point eight five nine three. The rest of the data are similar. The average exponent equals zero point eight six five three with an error of point zero zero zero six. Okay. So you've found a pattern. Damn, you're good. The arc length of a pie-wedge piece divided by the arc length of the smallest piece for each broken disk equals the rank in size raised to the power zero point eight six five three. Well, you'll be dipped in doggy doo, there's a mathematical relation in all this nonsense.

Nuclear war, pollution, disease, and a million other cool things threaten humanity and the only planet with life that you know of. And here you are getting all excited about finding an odd statistical relation among the size rank of pie-wedge-shaped pieces of broken ceramic disks and their average arc lengths. Hoo boy! How exciting. This is so deep and meaningful that the knowledge itself supercedes everything else. It's so simple that the results can be explained in one page. And so you do, just prior to strutting all the way to Mr. Childers' office, smiling at the statue-like guards along the way. These cold halls never seemed brighter in the entire one-year-plus that you've been here. Has it actually been a year? Time flies fast when you're having fun, you sarcastically joke to yourself just before ringing the button outside Asshole's office.

"Who is it?" his voice comes over the intercom speaker like a porn stud across a young starlet's back on a cheap video—too much static.

"Me again. I've got results."

He buzzes the door open. "That's better be good. It is three after five and I was on my way out."

"Here it is. Just read."

He snatches the paper and graph from you with the exasperated gesture of a schoolteacher who's about given up on a trouble-making student. Of course he never did expect you to find anything; the purpose of all this is just to see how much crap you can tolerate. Why, you may never know, but the project overseers want screens that are more like zombies than real people—scientists who don't really think as contradicting as it sounds. You've seen too many eager individuals full of potential, come on all bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, and ready to discover just exactly how the universe is put together so they can take it apart and sell it. Little do they know it's their minds that will be taken apart. Then, when that's done, they up and disappear one day like a dirty sock from the laundry mat, worn out and full of holes, moving on to a better place where even the useless are utilized. Actually you suspect they're transferred to another section of the project, the main section, M-sixty-seven, whatever that is. You're determined it won't happen to you. They can buy your dignity, but not your mind, not your sanity. But then you have no sanity to lose.

Mike Childers gets about halfway down the page and his eyes get wide. He's visibly impressed and surprised as well. "So you've found a pattern after all. Well, it's taken long

enough. You still have to finish collecting the data though, just so we can be certain that this is right. You still have about two-thirds of the disks remaining. But why is it that the graph curves? I mean, look here." he draws a circle on some scrap paper. "See, according to this formula the edges of the pieces don't add up to the whole circumference of the disk."

"Quite right. Look here." you imitate him and draw on top of his drawing. "See, pieces break off from the edges. You specifically told me to ignore chips and small pieces, so I did and only looked at the big pieces from the break which occurs at the center." Ha! ha! ha! These fools try to push some bullshit on you and, lo and behold, you find something meaningful. Exactly what it means you may never know. "So how about letting me work on something else since the data obviously aren't going to be any different for the next sixty or so thousand disks?"

"Well, I'm sorry, but we really need this work finished just to be sure the conclusions are right." He hands back your theory and graph like it was a dead skunk sandwich on moldy rye with jalapeños and anchovies.

It's useless to ask him if you can vary the force or position with which the disks are struck, the disk material, or any other variables. You stare at your work for a few seconds and see with perfect crystalline clarity what you have to do. "Yes, I guess you're right. A theory is not much good unless the results can be repeated." You give him a big used car salesman smile.

"Great," he smiles like he just won a football bet. "At least now you know what you're doing so the next six months or so of data collection won't be wasted. What say we call it a day and go grab a beer, eh?"

"Sounds great," you stand and smile back without even applying K-Y to your throbbing member, thinking you'll bend him and every management personnel in this hell-hole over and ram it in their fat brainwashing booties to the hilt all the way up to their brains so fast that they won't even know what hit them. They'll be even more fucked in the brain than they are now.

Opening the coffee shop on Saturday morning never was your favorite thing to do, but then making money is. Money makes the world go round. And in school they try to tell everyone that it's angular momentum. The place is dark and the summer sun slowly pokes its head over the horizon like it expects someone to shoot at it. You give it the finger, people don't drink as much coffee in hot weather. Not to mention business from the university is cut in half during the summer semester. Life's a bitch. Death's a whore.

"Mornin', Luke," you holler at the cook in the kitchen while you turn the lights on in the main part of the café.

"Mornin'," he hollers back. "Hungry?"

"Maybe later. Hey, don't tell anyone, but you might be seeing a lot more of me starting next week."

"How come?"

"Thinkin' about quittin' that job in the city," you explain while pulling the chairs off the tables and setting them on the floor.

"Shit. You're kiddin', right? I mean a forty-five thousand a year job ain't easy to find."

"I'll find something better. I can't do any worse, that's for sure."

"Suit yourself."

Okay. Get cash out of safe, open register, go through mail. Ah good, a package from Campos Coffee. Jorge sent you some more free samples. They always sell fast. Package list: box knife, slice slice, rip, open. Peanuts. Damn Styrofoam peanuts get everywhere. Sweep, sweep. Dust pan. Trashcan. Pull out coffee package. Ten pounds roasted coffee. Decent quality. Especially for free. Man, you really need a new greenhouse. Maybe Jorge would fund





Sixty thousand ceramic disks twenty five centimeters in diameter and one point seven five centimeters in width stand stacked up to the ceiling at the opposite end of the tiny lab/office like quarters on the Jolly Green Giant's dresser. They've been staring at you for almost four months. What the hell are you looking at?! you ask them and laugh not caring if your one sided conversation is being monitored by the old wench in the control station/security booth. Of course you could try varying the ceramic material or the diameter or thickness of the disks, or maybe the force with which they are struck or the position, but that would mean a whole nother project. It would also mean you're thinking and not just obeying orders. And of course these idiots just want to treat you like a lab rat to see if you're fit for their assembly line's seal of approval. They'll probably take all the data you've collected and shit-can it when you've finished anyway. Except you're not going to.

Ah well. It's time for your little one-man rebellion. The virus is loaded, the measuring instruments are damaged, nothing left to do but

<CRASH!!!!> The first sack of disks topples over. <CRASH!!!!> The second. And so on and so on. Oh Jolly Green's gonna have fun picking those up. Ho ho ho. Well, it's a good thing you got your paycheck Friday so they won't be able to deduct the damages.

<CRASH!!!!> goes sack number forty. That's about a tenth of them.

<Bleep bleep boop badeep> The door lets in a security guard.

'Stop right there'. He has his gun drawn on you. Two more guard rush up behind him.

Awww, did I bwake um's stoopid disky wiskies?

Mike Childers shows up and pushes his way in. **Just what the hell is going on in here?!** Are you having a nervous breakdown?

I'm not nervous and I'm not broken down. I'm quitting. **Quitting!!!!**  
<CRASH!!!!> another sack of disks topples and the security guards rush you, though slowly so they don't trip on the broken shards all over the floor.

'So I suppose you've found a better job. Or maybe you're satisfied running a coffee shop. Your ex boss speculates while the guards get a good grip on you.

'Anything's better than being a rat in a maze. And I'm amazed at the audacity of your mendacity and tiny mind. The world progresses and you lag behind and can kiss mine and go to hell or heaven if you think I care about project M Sixty Seven. Whatever that may be. Maybe the cow fart's meant nothing and you thought the clay disks would as well, but I found a pattern, a relation. Imagine my elation to take your test of pushing my patience to the limit and find within it an inkling of meaning. Like a solid gold needle in a haystack like you tried to make of my brain. Well I'm still sane. There was never any science done here and I doubt there ever will be and whatever you're doing you can do without. **ME!!!!** you yell in a guard's face and he jumps back releasing your right arm for a second. You try to struggle free from the second guard and topple another sack, but no luck. He's too big and strong.

In the brief pause you notice the tiny room you've stared at for months has grown larger after the significant reduction of disk stacks. The chaos all over the floor makes the place come alive and you've turned your meditation chamber into a battleground.

Mike Childers looks at you with cold wide eyes, seething with hate and frustration. 'And I had such high hopes for you. What do you know about project M Sixty Seven?'

Nothing except for what I heard over the speakers of the video monitor in the security station when **THAT SNOOPING VIDEO CUNT!** you yelled at the camera hoping she's watching and listening, as she must be or the guards wouldn't have rushed in. I left her station to go take a piss. The door to her station was left ajar and the guard with me was ordered to leave and go help catch Oscar the bull that got loose. Ahh, good ol' Oscar, now he was one fartin

motherfucker. Anyway, I poked my head in the station and heard you talking to those people in the conference room. If you don't believe me then you can inject me with truth serum, hook me up to a lie detector, torture me, beat me up, spank me, and drive a rusty nail through both my testicles because that is the truth. You've put me through your sick little tests for over a year now and I'm proud to say I've failed.

'You sure as hell have. **Get him out of here!**' the asshole orders his guards. And you're out the door faster than a frat kid who accidentally walked into a gay biker bar.

The coffee shop is in about as much chaos as the lab you just left. Waitresses are screaming orders and customers are getting impatient. 'What the hell?' You peek in the tiny two-person-only kitchen and—'Shut! Amy. What the hell?' Where's Luke?

She gives you a go-to-hell look, she always did hate having to work. Heaven forbid she actually do anything productive with her life. Oh well, she can't cook for shit anyway. But she doesn't really have to—all she has to do is cook for your customers. She explains. His mother died and he had to go out of town. Now that you're here, YOU can do this crap! She wads up her apron, throws it in the laundry bag with the dirty dishrags then stomps away like she always does when she's pissed.

So he's—'Okay everybody, listen up,' you get the waitresses' attention. 'The only hot items we can deal with today are burgers, fries, and soup. That's it. Sandwiches we can still do. Everybody with me?' They nod affirmative. 'Good. Also I need one of you. Hilary, you're going to help me here. Tasny, you've got the whole diner to wait on. Sorry, but it's only a temp thing.' So you start on the orders. There're only ten orders up, but the people have been waiting about twenty minutes for only simple menu items. It turns out you and Hilary make an efficient assembly line, you get the orders out in under eight minutes. From the order window you can see an artist talking to Mick, your hardly-ever-present, unless-he-wants-free-coffee partner. She's going to hang her crappy paintings in your coffee shop. Jesus. Oh well. Holy shit!

Hey, you yell out into the restaurant from the order window. 'Hold that piece up so I can see it.' It's nothing but a bunch of fragmented circles portrayed quite unflatteringly. It screams at you like it's in pain, as if the circles were dead or dying enemies. 'You want to hang your pieces up for a month?'

'Yes. If that's alright with you,' she says, knowing your reputation for hating artists and other time-wasters who think their tiny little emotional opinions should be placed on a pedestal and worshipped.

How about six weeks, you offer, ignoring Hilary's pleading look not to allow this lady's monstrous assault on geometry into the coffee shop where it will have to be viewed for six whole weeks.

"Six weeks?" the artist thinks she has herself a patron.

'Six weeks on one condition.'

"Yes?" she expects you're making a cruel joke.

'With the condition that I get to have that piece. I like the way it—seems to scream like the circles are in pain.'

The artist looks at the piece, then at you, then at the piece. The price tag is clearly visible: three hundred eighty dollars. What a joke.

"Very well," she agrees. 'Since you seem to understand that this piece and the series I'll display here represent my protest against Euclidean geometrical shapes, and logic in general, then I'm grateful that my work will be appreciated for what it was intended.'

'Lady, you can't imagine how much I appreciate it.' you tell her and slap a few strips of bacon on a club sandwich while Hilary gets the toast ready for the next one and pours out some crappy generic chips on the plate. 'Just hang it right there where I can see it.' And she does.

"Hey." Amy stomps back in the kitchen.

"Hey, what? Don't you like it?" you ask Amy just loud enough so that the artist can hear you.

"That's not what I meant. Hey, what the hell are you doing here and not at work?"

You lean back against the counter, arms folded, and smile. "I quit my job."

She walks off with a look like, "Man, you'd have to be there. Oh, but you are."

The day winds down and the night crowd comes in. Most of them are regulars. You relax at a table toward the front of the coffee shop sipping tea, eating a bagel with lite cream cheese, and talking with Hilary about life and such things. A group of math students sits at a table to your right, getting tutored in calculus by that weirdo with the mechanical hand. He's making twenty bucks an hour for it. Tax free. Lucky little shit. You could do that. Easy stuff. And the students are buying him coffee. You lost count of how many refills he's had. Even you were never that bad. He's probably surpassed the LD-fifty for caffeine about two hours ago.

"Why?" Hilary asks.

"Why, what?" you ask.

"Why that painting?"

"Oh, that. Well, let's just say it reminds me of a recent mistake that I'd care not to repeat."

"What? Not to buy crappy art?" She leans over just enough for you to get a good look down the front of her overalls. Man, you may not be able to take much more of this, she is tempting. You think you'll step in the closet-of-an-office and grab a quick toot. Maybe she'd care to join you. Ah, save it for later.

"No, it has to do with quitting my job. You wouldn't believe it, but the bastards had me running around doing stupid, useless garbage just to see if I could handle being in their weird little system. It was a... just a test. And I never found out what the real project was that... if I passed, they would have let me work on. For over a year I... never mind. I was ordered not to tell anyone, though I don't think it matters now. Anyway, that painting will remind me to never do anything I hate, no matter how much it pays."

"You're not kidding. But I don't see why the hell you'd need a painting to remind you. Hey, who's that jerk sitting by the window?" He always stares at me. It gives me the creeps."

"Him?" He's a doctor. I don't think you have anything to worry about. Hell, you're a cute girl. Every other guy who walks in that door stares at you. Hell, even I do, I can't help it."

"Doctor?" she says with that money sparkle in her eyes.

"Yep." No further words need to be said. The calculus study group, supercharged by caffeine and goaded by their tutor, is getting rowdy working on one particular problem. You peek over their shoulder. Indefinite integral. Easy. You could do it in your sleep and probably already have. There're few dirty dishes on their table so... "Can I get that for you?" you ask, pointing to an empty plate from which one fat cow just ate another. She nods and hands it to you, not wanting to be disturbed during this deep concentration brain strain. For shits and giggles you disturb her anyway. "Was the burger alright?"

"Yeah, it was okay." She turns to the tutor. "Damn it. I can't get this. Show me how."

"I've told you a hundred times, *I* can work these problems, but that won't help you at all. You gotta learn to do it yourself if you wanna pass your test. How do you think you'd integrate

this?" he pushes her. At least he realizes the only way people can learn is by doing it for themselves. He's not a con artist.

"I'm... by parts," she looks for a hint.

Try it, he tells her, not giving away a thing.

On and on this goes. Everyone else in the group is done and moved on to the next problem. This stupid porker bitch is obviously going to fail her class and still she pays for a tutor. Oh well... not your money.

Finally she nears completing the problem and

"Damn it! I forgot how to do these limits!" She is truly hopeless.

"Hospitality rule: you butt in, ignoring the math tutor's go-to-hell look.

"What's that?" she implores, looking more helpless than a scrawny baby does on one of those feed the starving-children-whose-parents-are-too-stupid-to-program.

You have to walk away to keep from laughing. There are a few dishes to pick up off the booth tables. Bussing never was one of your favorite things. But there's really not much else to do at night. You could probably handle the whole restaurant by yourself. But then you'd get an unexpected crowd. It's better to be prepared and keep a waitress around.

One last dish. You walk over to the math group and that fat lady has just about got the answer. After twenty-five minutes and two mocha shakes. Jeez.

"That's it?" she overpits the fat lady sings in delight.

"That's it?" Is that not enough?" the tutor asks in a smart-assed tone.

"Let me do it on my calculator," she insists and digs out her Hewlett Packard Forty Eight GX, a calculator designed to handle giant engineering feats, not to do simple problems like this. Why people trust machines more than logic you'll never know. No, that's not true—it's because a tiny piece of silicon can outthink a simpleton like this. "There. It's right, e over pi. Point eight six five two five five nine eight. Close enough."

<Crash!> the dish you were carrying breaks into four pie-wedge-shaped pieces, the second smallest about twice as big as the smallest, the third smallest about three times, the fourth about four times.

Fuck. You gasp and fall into the nearest chair then stare at the painting on the wall and then at the broken dish and then at the number on the fat lady's calculator.

It's just a plate—your restaurant's not gonna go broke. Some teenage bimbo with black nail polish and a backpack the size of a wallet, slurping a whipped-cream-topped triple mocha, needlessly tells you. You barely hear her.

"Hillary!" you yell for her to come out of the kitchen.

"Yeah. What's up?" she comes running, expecting the place to be on fire or something.

Large coffee. Kenya AA. Cream and two sugars. Hurry. And keep 'em comin'.

A growing dust cloud covers the city twenty-five miles away, kicked up by a giant cable at least a small city block in diameter thrashing around, releasing exploding arcs of electricity. Chaos on the airwaves: all TV and radio stations have a different story. No one has an answer.

Your arm pulls Amy close to you as she tries to bury her face in your shoulder, your shirt wet from her tears. You've never seen her as helpless as this, shaking with fright. Maybe it's the end of the world, but she sure is sexy. The television screams of carnage and destruction and all you can do is watch from the balcony. Riots, looting, end of the world rape in the streets. Heeere kitty, kitty, kitty. The interstate's clogged with traffic from people trying to escape the unknown terror. Luckily you're far away from the mayhem. Still no one has an answer.

Through the lens of your amateur telescope the snake looming on the horizon rears back and poises for another strike as hot gases and electric arcs pour out its head, making it fly about like an unattended garden hose at full blast. It springs forward and another building is crushed out of existence. Thousands dead. Army's moving in. No one has an answer.

Suddenly at noon the sun is on the horizon. A new sun, brief-lived. The shock wave takes a few minutes to hit you. The apartment building rattles and plaster dust falls. Amy is in hysterics, hiding in the bathroom. "Explosion was not nuclear," the TV reassures. Geiger counter measurements have confirmed this. But what is it? No one has an answer.

Hours pass. Amy calms down. You sip a cappuccino from your small home machine. Special forces have things under control. The President of The United States makes an announcement. "I cannot express... blah blah blah." Then with watery eyes he tells everyone "Superconducting energy storage test project." And of course the government will do its best to compensate the victims. He won't be winning the next election. That's why he's crying.

He's lying. Whatever it was, it wasn't what he said it was. Maybe it was a giant superconducting coil capacitor that somehow ran out of liquid helium coolant and over-heated when it got above the critical temperature. Perhaps. But whatever that thing was being used for, it certainly wasn't for energy storage. At least that wasn't its primary purpose.

On and on the TV drones. "Researchers are not yet certain what caused the catastrophic accident."

M-sixty-seven. Computer virus. <Slurp> Good cappuccino.

Good God, you've sent out about forty resumes... at the price of two dollars and forty eight cents each. No one's called you back. Goddamn the world. Everyone insists on knowing where you've worked for the past year, but you have nothing to tell them. You could lie and say you were taking care of a sick or elderly relative. No, nobody would buy it. You could tell them you were working on that project that blew itself to kingdom come, wherever that is. Maybe you'll find out some day. And if you tell them that, you'll not only not get the job, you might get lynched as well. Anti-government/science sentiments have been running high since that little accident, even though it only demolished a fifth of the city. Without a job reference, this is going to be a real pain in the ass. You better go talk to some of your old professors. You almost regret having lost contact with most of them. Especially since the chemistry building is just a couple of blocks from *Awakenings*. Well, it's time to go have another chat with the evil Dr. Frankenstein. Hopefully he'll be able to get you a good job.

"What?" What do you mean he's in the hospital, dying?" you ask Shauna.

"Can't you understand English?" He was exposed to a lethal dose of dimethyl mercury. It's amazing how your timing is always so perfect. "Can't you just go away and come back some other time, or not come back at all?" she more insists than asks.

"Yeah. Guess I don't have much choice," you reply and shut the graduate student office door. Half of them are professional students who will be here for ten more years, the other half are science addicts who live in the lab and will probably get snatched up by a rich company sooner or later. Well, they aren't going to be much help. Hmm... the staff in the chemistry office should know where the evil Dr. is staying. You can tell them you want to send flowers or a card. Those odd bats will be sure to tell you.

"Hi, Dr. Frankenstein," you whisper as you enter the hospital room. His wife's sleeping on a cot next to him and she looks exhausted. She won't be waking up. Well, she better get what use



out of that ten-dollar-cot that she can because the hospital will charge her (or Medicare) at least twenty dollars a day to use it. And each time she blows her nose or dries her tears she's spending a dime on the tissues. Too bad you don't own a hospital, that could be your money.

"How did you get in here?" he pants. He's in bad shape, won't last long.

"Well, you know me," you smile at him and put out your hand to shake, omitting the part about how you lied to the nurse, telling her you were his son, as if you could be related to a flabby blob like him. He looks rather conical with tubes sticking into and out of his giant belly—sort of like well, like a dying person.

He looks away and ignores you, leaves you holding your hand out like an idiot. You set the card on the nightstand.

"Well, I just came by to say I was sorry to hear about your accident. How did it happen?"

"Leaky glove in the dry-box." He holds up his right hand, showing the burn. One of the chemists/biologists' worst nightmares. Exposure to a few drops of dimethyl mercury and the individual only has a few weeks to live with seizures, hearing and vision loss, vomiting, constipation and other fun things. And if the poor soul does live, it will be with major damage. Small amounts of mercury are okay though, because that means a person can have some really cool looking mutant retarded kids to sell to a sideshow or, if the person doesn't need the money, he or she can just lock the kids in the cellar and bring them out at parties. What a wonderful conversation starter!

"Shit, I'm sorry. I came as soon as I heard. Everyone at the lab sends their regards."

"Did they know you were going to come here?"

"Uh, no, but they were all upset, not knowing what to do. They're pretty much helpless right now without you, there," you lie to make him feel good.

"You're lying to make me feel good. Won't work," he grins. "What are you doing, alive?"

"Hub? Why shouldn't I be? You're the one who's dying, not me."

"The accident at the project. You weren't there?" He always was curious about everything, you have to give him that—the mark of any good scientist.

"Ah. That." You sit and ponder a second and blurt it out. "I quit that job shortly before it blew up. I must be the luckiest bastard alive. Except now I don't have a job."

"And that's why you're here," he doesn't even need to ask. He more states the fact than asks the question. "Well, your calcium battery results from your doctor's thesis could not be repeated. <Cough! Cough! Cough!> The data you reported were, I strongly suspect, fake. You know why I recommended you for that job at project M-sixty-seven?"

"Why?"

"Because I hate you! And it was the only job I recommended you for. Apparently it was too good for you. <Cough! Cough! Cough!> Do you know what they studied?"

"No. I never made it past their idiotic screening tests, thank God. So fill me in. What did I miss out on?"

"Interdimensional studies. Now leave." He calmly points at the door, as if he has nothing to worry about, and he doesn't—he's dying. "<Cough! Cough! Cough! COUGH! COUGH!!>" He pushes a button on the end of a cord for a nurse to come running. A nurse comes running. His wife wakes up. The evil Dr. Feckstein quits coughing. You leave.

Well, you won't be getting a good job any time soon.

All the evil, hatred,  
Lust, and greed  
of man is multiplied  
a thousand fold  
and rests in the heart,  
soul, and mind of  
one

Is he the Antichrist?  
A demon?  
A hideous alien?  
A mutant?  
What corrupted him?  
Was he born into his role?  
Or is he just an actor?

The stage is a mirror  
And he's you

Ahhh Cheese. The wonderful ye low spotted dairy product spoiled again by green and bluish mold. It might be on a cheap American and Colby, but you'll put it to good use. It's only a little moldy. You can slice away the green spots. The customers will never know. And it's free. About sixty packages of it.

Ah, good. Bread. Made out of wheat from the heart and of the good ol' USA, the staple of our American diet. Bleached, processed, and enriched with vitamins and minerals to replenish what was lost in the processing process. Yum yum. Shit. The wrappers have been sliced and the bread's gotten hard. Goddamn asshole grocery store managers always sabotage the old food they throw out so the bums and scumbags can't salvage the food, get sick from it, and sue the store. Oh well. And speaking of bums, at least you can get all the free bread you need at Brunch, or Buddies, a.k.a. Crumbs For Bums, the homeless shelter soup kitchen. Ten loaves per person. Some decent high-quality bread is, too, donated by various grocery stores around town so you don't have to get all smelly digging in the trash for bread. But you'll dig anyway. There's always something to find. Nice thing about winter, the food stays fresh outside so you can dumpster dive for *Awakenings*. Not much else here. Wait, underneath some cardboard boxes are tomatoes and a few bags of oranges, only one or two gone bad in each bag, the rest are still fresh. Cool. Sour cream. Only a little past the expiration date. A few bunches of grapes, starting to turn brown, but in a fruit salad with mayonnaise no one will notice. Nothing to really get excited about in this grab-bag free for all. The early bum catches the food. Only in America can people eat like kings without paying a cent.

You put all the food in a box, set the box on the edge of the dumpster corner, throw it to the ground, climb out, scrape the half-frozen dumpster slime off your old shoes, and drive away with the stash in your trunk. There aren't too many stores that still use dumpsters; most use compactors nowadays. Oh well, there's still enough to help save the restaurant (and you) a hundred bucks a week or more. It's a neat little trick you learned from your hippie friends. And sleeping at *Awakenings* so you don't have to pay rent for an apartment saves a few bucks as well. Goddamn the day the cook left. Luke got called away by The Force. The coke brings in a little cash, but not enough to support the store *and* your habit. Fuck. Fall. You gotta start dealing in volume. Of course Hillary's and Julie's asses bring in a little cash. Fucking stupid waitresses, they'll do anything for coke. Great stuff, that cocaine. Power, control, money. You just need more of it. That'll come when you get better connected. This small town just doesn't have enough of a market, not without stepping on people's toes; there're already a few local dealers. And Mick, your restaurant partner, is begging you to sell out to him so he can have a good tax write-off. Well, you'll get another decent cook soon.

And if only Amy hadn't kicked you out of the apartment when she saw you and Jim snorting coke in the living room a week after quitting your job. Oh well, at least you signed a lease with her dad when you rented *Awakenings*. You can stay there indefinitely as long as you pay the rent. That day Amy kicked you out, still burns in your memory. And things were going so damn well, she was working, you were happy, and then WHAM! no more dancer pussy. Oh, sure she tried everything in her power to help you, but unwanted help never does anyone any good. Least of all people who enjoy their nasty little habits.

If only you'd known she was on the balcony looing in the hammock instead of at work where she said she'd be. Ah well, she was getting suspicious of you anyway, what with you always working the same shift as Hillary. Damn! Things were going great before she caught you with the coke. You quit your job at that dimensional doomsday project, fucked the shit out of Hillary in your tiny restaurant office, went home and fucked the shit out of Amy the

next day. You haven't had that much sex in ages. What ever could have made you perform like that? Well, Amy sure did freak out. You were probably just glad to be away from that stress-inducing shitty job. Your nuts exploded like Project M. Sixty-seven did a week later. Whatever it was, you haven't been able to repeat it. You haven't seen Amy much since then. Just as well, who needs her when there's Hillary and others? Hillary can fuck like a pro—better than Amy, but she doesn't have a dancer's stamina or strength. However Hillary will do anything for a toot of coke. Yes, even that.

No way in hell am I selling out and don't even ask me again or I'll nip your fucking spine out, you fat wet back piece of shit.

Fucking racist pig, that's what you are.

I'm not racist. I hate everyone. Now why don't you get your worthless ass out of the store unless you want to bus tables, or do the books, or run the register, or make coffee, or. Sorry, I keep forgetting the only thing you know how to do is write worthless poetry and teach students to be as worthless as you are. Man, whoever said Mexicans were lazy must have looked at you for an example. It's no fucking wonder this place's starting to go in the hole again. But that I be fixed as soon as I find another decent cook.

Every other night you and Mick argue about the rights to the coffee shop. He wants you to sell out to him at what you paid for it—a little over thirty thousand dollars for your share—so he can have himself one helluva tax write-off. Why he'd need it you'll never know, he's only an English professor after all. But you're almost tempted to sell out. After all, you could live on the money for awhile as you try to find a new job. God, you haven't done anything but manage the coffee shop for the last four months. And if you get another job, the coffeehouse will go under if you're not here to manage it. You need a manager—as soon as you get another decent cook. Every one you've hired since Luke has been pathetic or didn't show up on time or wasn't very clean or—well, you get the idea. Of course you do. No one knows people better than you do.

Yet another poetry reading. Lifeless diots with nothing better to do than gather every Tuesday night as if their lives depend on it, as if it's all they live for. Maybe it is. The lights are turned down, smoke fills the room, coffee after coffee's doled out for free. Mick pays for the free coffee at the poetry reading nowadays, just so he can get a crowd, few people show otherwise. Little groups of poets congregate in the various corners of the coffee shop.

The older crowd hangs out together discussing the duality of nature. Or is it the trinity? they debate, never even certain of their own esoteric convictions, if that makes sense. 'Do the fundamental operations of the universe manifest themselves in pairs or trios?' Who gives a shit? You feel like telling them to check out a general physics or chemistry book, but what's the point? They wouldn't be able to understand it anyway.

The feminazis all hang out at one of the large round tables in the center of the room, discussing equal rights and the terrible treatment of slaves in Burma. 'Pepsi-Co and Texaco must be stopped,' they shout. Various boycott methods bounce back and forth between them like hard rubber super-balls in a brick room with ADD kids on a sugar high the day after Halloween. And we mustn't forget Rape Awareness Week. **No means no!!** And yes means yes and black means back and white means white. Right? Right. Ah well, if they didn't have some reason to scream about their victimization then they wouldn't have much of a life now would they? Look at me. Look at me. Look how pathetic I am! Feel sorry for me. Please

give me attention. Like everyone in the world hasn't been shat on at some point in their lives. Spoiled rotten daddy's girl cunts.

And lastly, you have no single word to define them. Goth kids, hippies, crazy street-people, drug addicts, lunatics, lowlifes, scumbags, idiots. Well, maybe not all of them are idiots. There's that one psycho with the blonde hair stirring coffee as if it'll make him live forever. He's a math tutor, not really a poet, although you always see him writing. You've never bothered to take a look at his work. It's probably similar to the futile ravings scribbled all over your bathroom walls. To sum it all up, you'd say that nothing these people have to say is really worth listening to. But then nothing anyone has to say is really worth listening to. Everyone talks and talks and talks and no one ever just shuts up and does anything. Everyone's got a solution to the world's problems, a solution or utopian scheme they're too busy thinking up or telling everyone else about to ever put an ounce of effort into actually implementing it.

The first poet takes the stand. One of the daring young poets turning sarcasm into art as he reads about why it's cool to drink and drive, speeding down the highway with a teenage bimbo in a tube top, blah, blah, blah. Oh, sure it's funny, but it somehow lacks any significant meaning, or not enough to be remembered in any detail. An old fart goes up next. You recognize the idiot as the husband of the woman with the coat hanger wire art. He tries to give his poem philosophical profundity, but it somehow lacks any wit to be considered true wisdom, and even if it had any wit, the ideas are based on some ethereal bullshit about the primitive subconscious sections of the brain versus the higher spiritual being. Everyone gives him a half-hearted clap when he finally finishes after seventeen minutes. Most people are just overjoyed to see him finish. A young feminist gets up and bitches about her last boyfriend and how he just fucked her, and used her, and treated her like shit. The rhyming is more clumsy and pitiable than *Roses Are Red*. At the end she breaks into tears, which alone is enough to touch the audience, but the fact that she has an ass to die for makes everyone give up the applause as if she were the president of the United States announcing that taxes have just been abolished. You've seen too many of these damn poetry readings, they're all the same.

The Raven. Mick announces the next poet over the mike. Everyone expects some old lady to get up and recite Poe, everyone but as he breaks, they know who it is. It's that weirdo with the hand. He's been drinking coffee all afternoon and evening, and now he's set as dead by a stack of mathematics books and copies of papers from various math journals and he's opened his poetry journal. You've never heard him before but whatever he's going to read you get the feeling it will definitely not be Poe.

Helio victims. His greeting receives mild laughter, and might receive more if not for his psychopathic grin burning with sadistic glee. 'I know, Kar,' he addresses the girl who had written the poem about her ex-fuck. 'If you'd give up those rich good-looking yuppie bastards and go out with a poor, ugly bum like me, you just might get treated with a little respect. How's about it, baby? Wanna date?'

Oh, sure, he's cruel, no doubt. But he's got a point. If she goes out with guys who can have any girl they want, she can expect to be treated no better than a sex toy. At least he tries to lighten it up by asking her out, knowing there's no way in hell she'd ever go out with an ugly little geek with a fucked-up hand. And so she dries the last of her tears, perhaps subconsciously understanding what he's trying to say.

No? Well, Kar, perhaps once you see how romantic my poetry is, it will touch a soft spot in your soul and you'll change your mind. At least he has the humility to laugh about his own writing. And so he starts with a few cute little limericks that aren't half bad, a bit risqué, a

bit depressing, a bit morbid, but not half bad. And certainly not romantic. Then—oh God, you'd have to be there. Somehow fucking an inflatable tyrannosaurus-rex doll isn't exactly what you expected as the subject of romantic poetry. It certainly isn't what you'd ever think any poem could be about. Certainly not one executed with such precision, almost mathematical in measure and meter, reminiscent of *'Twas The Night Before Christmas*. And it lacks all seriousness in wording and context. Some scorn, others applaud and shake his hand for his bravery in throwing all convention out the window—or in the toilet. Mick's shaking with resentment. And how about you? You find yourself on the floor writhing in fits of laughter like you haven't in—It's been so long that you've forgotten when you last laughed like this. All work and no play.

It's not the poem, however—it's the fact that so many people take their work so seriously, as if their puny ideas actually mean something, as if they have ideas so holy that we should all just drop what we're doing and listen to their sacred ramblings. It's these people who are so offended, everyone else just thinks it's humor, not deep or profound, not blasphemous, just humor. That's all it is. Isn't it? Oh, of course it is—quit being silly. What else could it be?

<Knock, knock, knock!>

"Flummumble shishk rufph. Ungh. Go 'Way! I'm asleep!!"

<Knock, knock, knock!> "Open up! Police!" Their flashlight beams stab through the coffee shop window and hit you right in the eye, making you get up off the small loveseat where you sleep nowadays.

Shit. What is it now? You switch off the burglar alarm and open the door. "Uh, we are closed, but I guess you're not here for a coffee."

"You got that right. I'm Inspector Anders and this is Officer Collins. We're gonna have to ask you to come to the station with us."

"What's wrong?" you ask, annoyed at this untimely intrusion as a new dawn dares to sneak over the horizon, making you yet another day older.

"Your business partner was murdered."

"Murdered?! That geek?" Who the hell would murder him? He was a pathetic dweeb," you hit the nail on its proverbial noggin.

"Rumor has it that you and he argued tonight. Wanna tell me what all that was about?" he orders rather than asks.

"Yeah, if you'd please get that fucking flashlight out of my eyes." Cops aren't exactly the most intelligent beasts in the world. He clicks the button on his lethal club of a flashlight and the glare disappears, only to reveal the glare of his anger. And you recognize him. "Hey! Talk about déjà vu. You're that cop who picked me up the morning after Peaches Crowley's birthday party."

"Jesus! Sure enough. That's still an open case," he reminds you in an accusing tone.

"Yeah, well, I like to think Peaches solved it himself. But anyway, how the hell did Mick get killed? He was here just last night. And I've been here the whole time, haven't moved from this hellhole, we didn't close till four in the morning."

"I suppose you've got alibis then?"

"Damn right I do! Do I still need to come to the station?"

"Yes," he answers like you asked a question as stupid as asking him if he wanted a million dollars. "You don't seem too upset about this."



"Look. I'm too tired to really be upset and even if I was more than half awake I doubt I'd care. Mick and I didn't exactly get along as business partners and it was the business we argued about last night. Are Mick's wife and daughter okay?" you feign some concern as you dig out your keys to lock the shop.

"No. We'll talk about it at the station."

"Yeah, great. Mind if I just follow in my car so I can get back here?"

No, that's fine, he tells you obviously his suspicion has been cut in half, but his disappointment has quadrupled. Everyone wants a scapegoat, justice is irrelevant, vengeance means everything. Especially to cops. They have to keep the public happy and the police commissioner in office.

So apparently Mick was doing some dirty shit behind your back, the bastard. Or so the police tell you that that's what they've found out. Organized crime. Who'd have thought? You're lucky he didn't try to take you for a wade in cement shoes. But a small fry like you's hardly worth the trouble. That must be why he wanted the restaurant so badly to launder dirty money. Apparently he was stealing from the wrong people.

Someone torched his house with some nasty little incendiary bomb similar to napalm. He was trapped in his house by the iron bars across his windows. Man, you'd like to thank the sonuvabitch who did that. His wife was killed also. A waste of perfectly good ass, but oh well. His daughter's in the hospital, expected to live but with severe lung damage, some really nasty burns, and on life support. You suppose you'll have to pay her a courtesy visit.

"Visiting hours are almost over. Perhaps you should come back tomorrow," the nurse at the desk tells you.

"Yeah, I suppose I should. Thanks," you tell her and start to walk off. But then there's the alternate hallway. And you're anxious to set these damn flowers down. This won't take long. It reminds you of when you visited Dr. Heckstein just before he died a few months back. It's really weird the way events seem to occur in pairs. Perhaps it signifies something on a deeper cosmic level of consciousness of which you're unaware. Maybe those old poets were right. Yeah, whatever. Damn, this fake beard itches.

Tubes stick out of and into every part of her body. She's barely conscious, drugged up with morphine to kill the pain. Burns are visible on her face and arms. She looks like melted plastic. What was once a cute little girl has become a monstrosity. Stab condition, expected to live. Unfortunate, you think, for her, for the world, and especially for you. With her father's share (now hers) of the coffeehouse profits you could do quite well for yourself.

The artificial breathing pump hisses like Darth Vader. "May The Force be with you, little one," you whisper in her ear and she smiles a melted marshmallow grin through her baked lips. Lab gloves on. Disconnect the alarm switch and hit the off button to the pump. P-flow over mouth like you've seen a hundred times in the movies. She's got a strong will. It takes a few minutes. She spazzes and twitches about for a bit. Pulse gone. And it's over. Turn the pump back on. Can't reconnect the alarm though or code blue will bring every goddamn doctor and nurse in the hospital running to you. Lab gloves off. Everyone will think some Kavorikan wannabe came in and did a fast one. Nice thing about this tiny hospital, no security cameras. Hiary would sure like these sympathy flowers you bought. Carnations aren't exactly romantic, but a nice thought. You'll have to throw the sympathy get well card away. Flowers for the nose and nose-candy for the brain. The trick to keeping whores happy and under control: treat them with a little respect. No one else will.

## Unveiled

Unfired in a world of darkness blacker than a night without stars. I have destroyed countless universes. Our worlds collide inside a space so small it doesn't exist like your love. My hatred permeates all and all is a word you can never fathom. Desensitized to sensitivity and maybe I care too much about nothing. And nothing is another word you I never understand where I'm coming from. Rip me open to see what's inside. Smaller than an atom, trapped and split into two many parts. Infinite fingers point, touch, and tear away my humanity just to see what reality really is. And, yes, infinite is another of those words.

They take away my space, time, probability and more words in foreign tongues in foreign dimensions than your tiny mind could ever grasp, leaving you defenseless as a kitten in a wolves den.

People, animals, plants, and a living-dead things walk by and don't stop to help, don't even take notice until it's too late to save themselves by saving you. Everyone is their own messiah. Everyone's crucified. No one left to save.

The scream blinds inside you but won't escape as they rape your space and the soul you thought you didn't have. Find haven in crowds and your fear will dissipate as my hope did long ago. Your fear will scatter throughout the countless fragments of you around where I exist. Be glad you'll be long dead before you can ever discover what fear really is. And, of course, it's just another one of those little words.

Welcome home. We missed you.

**Order up!** the cook yells for someone anyone to get the damn food out of the order window and out to the customers so he'll have room to put more orders up in the window and yell for someone to come get

It's days like today that make you glad you got out of bed this morning. You think while going over the profits with Mellina Balista. Pronounced Ball-ees-ta. God she's a feminazi psycho ball-breaker bitch from Hell but can she manage a coffee shop. She's the one who decided to jack up the prices and add health food items to the menu to run off the scumbags and low lifes. At least you still have enough freaky customers to keep the place interesting without actually being dangerous. Most of the odahs who come in now are kids who support their eccentricities with money they get from mommy and daddy. It's the older freaks that are the real trouble. If they don't learn to take care of themselves by their early twenties then usually their parents cut them off and they'll do anything to support whatever bad habits they've developed. habits such as drugs, vandalism, genital piercing, and writing poetry.

Just as these thoughts zip through your brain at velocities that would make the new space plane jealous, a kid with blue and green spiked hair walks in and heads for the smoking section. Mellina tried to make the entire place non smoking, however she hadn't planned on the fact that many organic health food nuts smoke. Oh sure they smoke organically grown tobacco but they still smoke. And of course the kid puts out an American Spirit and packs the tobacco by poking his meta spike/sud driven through his lower lip into the end of the cigarette. Originally it's hard to find these days. Everything's been done before. That's why the kid dresses like a punker but he's far too clean to be authentic or have any authority in the subculture of punkdom.

Profits are up about eighty percent or better from last years. That's what's just on paper of course. There's still the coke business which is far too lucrative for you to quit dealing in. You just have to be sure to keep the volume down low enough to remain inconspicuous. Can't let greed get the better of you. It's the girls surprisingly enough that bring in the most money. Oh maybe not directly no, but with the connections to other businesses and networking through the community high class pussy peddling has turned out to be the most lucrative business you're involved in.

Inside every business or local government agency in which you could possibly be interested, there's someone who's desperate to get laid and will do anything for a decent piece of ass. It's amazing how our times have produced so many isolated, lonely individuals that they can't get out and find a decent mate. Or maybe their wives or girlfriends are so unattractive that sex has become more of a chore than a privilege. You've even got a link to the gay scene but they're a bunch of shady backstabbing bastards that you'd just assume not deal with. They're a lot like women-- women with power, money, and testosterone that is. You just have to be careful to keep all this well hidden besides being illegal. Mellina would quit in an instant if she knew about half the ventures you're involved in.

Damn it I've told you before-- there's no way in hell that I'm going to manage the bar certainly not in addition to the restaurant. I mean, Jesus, every day you ask for more-- even after I was able to buy out the place next door when they had that accident the stupid idiots. she reminds you of how efficient she is not that she needs to. However she's nowhere near as efficient as you are not with the way you set all the flammable sovents in the bike shop next door on fire. (Fire! Fire! Fire! Selfie down Beavis. You give a silent thanks to the caveman who discovered it. To bad he couldn't have taken out a patent on it. That would have been an investment that makes Dell, Microsoft, and AOL look like lemonade stands. Fire sold on the Caveman Exchange CMX FR. You also give silent thanks to the plumber who invented sprinkler systems. And the engineer who invented fire retardant walls. And the electrician who invented fire alarms.

"I'm not asking you to manage the whole damn bar just the inventory. For now anyway until I get someone else. And look, we can knock out the wall between the restaurant and the bar so we can use the space from the bar for the restaurant during the day and vice versa for the bar at night. It'll take some time, hopefully not more than a few weeks, but it'll be worth it. We'll do it during the Christmas break so it'll give us time to plan. It won't be as big a hassle as it sounds like. And everyone can take a vacation. Paid of course. I'll announce it at the party. Keep it a secret. And when the bar's up and running I can take a little time away from the greenhouse and lab to give you a hand. Okay?" you give her your sad puppy-dog-look that she always falls for every time you ask her to do one more little thing.

Tick-tock goes the clock while she looks down and around and everywhere to avoid your stare, but you put your finger under her chin and make her look at your pathetic help-less grin. "Hmm?" you ask.

"Okay," she finally submits. "As long as I don't have to ever be here when the bar's open. I mean, you know how much I hate liquor. And the health food menu was my idea, so just don't forget how much money it's made for you."

"I'm not likely to do that. But anyway, you about ready for the birthday party next weekend?" you ask her about your upcoming birthday party and *Awakenings* anniversary party.

"Yeah, all the food's been ordered. You take care of everything else." By everything else she means the booze and pot. Mary Jane still isn't legal, but congress is working on new laws, mostly inspired by some crazy old crusading bat who's going town-to-town shouting about how pot isn't that bad. And somehow she received a favorable court ruling that made the 'War On Drugs' campaign release the info about where its funding comes from. Not surprisingly about forty percent's from alcohol, tobacco, and pharmaceutical companies. Pot heads throughout the world rejoiced and fired one up. Typically over half the people getting stoned were too young, under the new proposed-though-not-yet-passed law to be lawfully celebrating their triumph: twenty-one and over only, of course.

"No prob. I'm just hopin' it'll be a bigger bash than *Awakenings* five-year anniversary was last year. Why don't you go run check on the kitchen. I want to go over a few things here and read my mail." you tell Melina.

"The kitchen is fine. Will you relax?" She knows how stressful owning and running a business can be.

"I am relaxed. You relax and go on play in the kitchen for a minute. Have one of the girls make a cappuccino for me or something."

"What kind?"

"Surprise me. Go." you tell her and enter your tiny but suitable office. It's hard to get a little privacy when you're in charge. When her slightly big butt disappears around the corner, you shut the door and go over the accounts. The farmer that sells you the 'organic' eggs and dairy and ethically raised poultry and pork has jacked up the prices a little. On paper. However, the farmer slips half the proceeds back to you and substitutes the 'organic' food with ordinary every day crap. Like it matters. No one can taste the difference. No one but your pocket book. That little scam brings in a few hundred bucks a month. You're going to have to open a Swiss bank account soon if this keeps up. Your broker might be able to assist you. Oddly enough there's also a letter from Waterhouse where you keep your stocks. The nuke plant stock you bought for almost nothing is still doing well, the genetics engineering company's kicking ass, and you bought some off-shore oil drilling companies when oil was down to eight bucks a barrel. Damn it though, it's still kind of slow. At this rate it'll take you at least a decade before you see a million. Too bad you didn't buy Dell or AOL in the early nineties before they went through the roof. But the crash of ninety-nine

temporarily voided out all that. And it gave you an opportunity to buy in low. There are a few more letters with people trying to sell you crap you don't need or want. New coffees, new machines, new cooking equipment, etc. etc. And there's the fourth (or is it fifth?) letter from the American Chemical Society asking for dues. Fuck them. What have they ever given you? Nothing. And... What's this? Been a while since you've seen that logo. It's Jorge's personal logo, not the one he uses for his coffee company. Open it up and... What the hell is this for? A check. One thousand two hundred nineteen dollars and change. What the hell? Maybe it's for greenhouse equipment or... No. Holy shit. You'd almost forgotten about it, your share of the profits from XRM. Sonuvabitch. You can't stop making money.

<Knock knock.>

Yeah... you say to the closed door.

Got your cappuccino." Mellina yells through the door.

"Bring it in. Let me guess, you made it with XRM."

A moment's relaxation before the guests arrive for your birthday party. Thirty-one candles. Should be thirty-six, but who's gonna know? Hell, it's not really even your birthday. But it's *Awakenings*' sixth anniversary. Any excuse for a party. And you always did love Halloween. White lies defeat time, but not always.

Her breasts are getting saggy. In the right light, lines show up under her eyes, though not as many as she's put up her nose. She's twenty-seven and looks even older than your real age. Her pussy's damn near worthless, been banged all out of shape. Her eyes have a dead zombie look. Stupid bitch should have got her degree in computer science instead of literature. But then Hilary is the only truly loyal whore you've got. And she can suck cock better than any girl you've ever known. Practice makes perfect and she... put her talents to good use tonight. But that's later.

The two of you enjoy a few lines of coke, laughing and talking about brainless top cs, new movies, new music, new fashions... the same old shit. Huggy, kissy, touchy, teey. Clothes on the floor. She loves to give head, sucking and teasing, licking the front of your shaft just under the head, where the nerve bundle is. Her left hand holds your balls down to pull the skin taut and she sucks like a brand new Hoover. No teeth scraping. All lips and tongue and suction, copied as much blood into your dick as physics will allow. Pressure differential fanatique. Spasmic orgasmic, she drinks every drop non-stop. Screams saturate the house. It's difficult to pinpoint their origin, but they must have come from you. Right? Oh, of course! Disoriented, ecstatically overwhelmed.

There really is no preparing for a huge party, all you can do is relax and let it happen. Well, now you're relaxed. All you have left to do is let it happen. Go with the flow. Hilary gets dressed and ready for the party with still more Halloween decorations, even though Halloween's a little more than a week away. She loves the morbid decorations and party favors almost as much as you do. She has sense enough not to buy any of those cute paper cutout ghosts with smiley faces or jack-o'-lanterns with toothless, retarded grins. The tarantula in the cage adds a nice touch. Tarantulas really are pretty much harmless, their bites not much worse than a bee sting. And it helps give your house the eccentric genius ambiance that you're after. People love to do business with someone they perceive as being beyond the understanding.

Mellina and Cindy finally show up with the food around one o'clock. Bob and Kelly show up with the booze. Mellina orders Cindy about like a trained dog in a circus ring, the stressed-out dictator coffeehouse restaurant manager managing to lose control of her emotions. So, when no one's looking, you swat Cindy on the ass and tell her she's doing a great job and not to worry about Mellina. She swats back and says she's not, then jams her tongue in your mouth. Waitresses! Gotta love 'em!

"Bob! Kelly!" you yell into the den. "One of you guys go take Mellina a glass of Chardonnay." You always did have an answer for everything. And fix me a Long Island iced tea when you get the bar set up.

And so you kick back in your silk bathrobe, looking like a Hugh Hefner wannabe minus the pipe, lounging on your rented couch in the living room of your rented house and flipping through the channels on your rented TV, which is part of your sixty-five hundred dollar rented entertainment system. Why buy if you can turn cash into profit faster than the interest on a loan your toys can accumulate? Slow, steady growth. Control. Power. Of course you could take it all to Vegas and have a chance in a thousand of being a billionaire overnight. But foolish risk is not in your nature. Or at least it hasn't been in many years. And certainly not if money is involved. Risk for excitement? That's another story.

After a few minutes you get bored with the tube and disappear into your bedroom to get dressed. You take your time and can hear the guests start to arrive and make themselves at home watching the pre game show or chatting with Bob, the talkative bartender who knows about everything there is to know about sports, the main reason you hired him to work at your bar that will open up shortly after Christmas. Popularity is important.

The ladies all compliment Mellina and Cindy on a wonderful job of preparing all the food, organic food from your restaurant. The men compliment them too, but in the more obvious way of making pigs of themselves and washing down the munchies with aged diluted ethanol containing trace amounts of various natural esters and aldehydes. And also fermented hops, simple carbohydrates converted to ethanol and carbon dioxide. Whatever biological waste the yeast fungus excretes is what we love to drink: microbial piss and farts.

Hey! Here he is! The old man! Happy thirty one! everyone shakes your hand.

"One Long Island iced tea." Bob says and slides the drink down the small bar to you, trying to put on a show within the space to do it.

So all the town sophists try to relax while being stuffy and pretentious. The football game starts and the booze, beer, wine and pot kick in. They all start to let their hair down and go crazy. "Penalty, you stupid son of a bitch!!!" **Bullshit!!!** And so on, letting out civilized barbaric yawps, which are poor imitations of authentic barbaric yawps. Thank God for liquor and pot, or these idiots would just about be unbearable. You'd break out the powder except some of them might be offended, especially Marcia, the county courtroom clerk.

Some of the wives watch the game in the den. Some of the husbands join the wives in the kitchen where there's food and a much smaller TV. A few of the kids and younger crowd hang out on the back patio, true to life, not yet polluted by societies silly whims and arbitrary creations of what is or is not fun and proper. They'll learn, they must be kept under control, as all the ignorant masses must.

Some of the kids brought their swimsuits to enjoy your heated pool. You notice the other men occasionally sneaking a glimpse out the den window at each other's fifteen year-old daughters in their tiny little bathing suits and bikinis, with their nipples popping out in the cool fall air when they take a break and come out of the pool.

Half time. Birthday cake. Stupid song. Poorly sung by drunken fools. Blow out candles. They reight. Magnesium dust in the wick relights the paraffin vapors. You explain much to everyone's dismay, licking the icing from the butt of a lit candle. Open presents, showing complete disrespect for the elegant wrapping, which probably cost more than half the presents. But you were specific, nothing expensive. The gifts are cute and a few of them even functional. But then what can you buy for the person with everything? And not everyone at this party is rich or even

moderately well off. A lot of the guests are just average Joes and can't afford to buy you a Porsche or a Rolex. But it's not like you would want those things anyway.

This isn't really a party. Yet that is. It's more of a joke. Games over. The Br's win thirty-one to fourteen. Big deal. Boring game. But then all football is. Some of the employees from *Awakenings* start to show up and most of the forty-four guests start to leave, knowing that their party is over and a new one is about to start. It's sort of like the change in Central Park when the sun goes down: the inline skaters, joggers, and baby strollers disappear and the whores, junkies, crack heads, rapists, and muggers come out. The transition isn't quite as noticeable at your party, but almost.

Melina and Bob leave everything to Hillary, Cindy, and you. The food's almost gone, but your new guests won't be after food. And you can always order a pizza or three if needed.

The *Awakenings* employees are mostly all in college. Some of their friends also show up. Not a lot of them are old enough to legally drink, but then you explicitly told them they drink, they spend the night. No way are you going to be busted for one of these kids driving home drunk. As so that little excuse to keep them here might make for some great sex. Of course you have to tell them the bar's off limits. But then when your back's turned. Who's to know? It's all just a front to cover your rear. And liquor's the least of the worries at this party. The powder is poured and chopped, the LSD is placed on tongue after tongue like sacrament at Easter service. This is my body, this is my blood. It may not save you, soul, but it will save your sanity, allowing you a much needed escape from the nine to five, making you feel more alive than a close brush with death. Nine o'clock. Now the party starts to start. It won't really get hoppin' till round eleven or so. These are just the die-hards looking to get an early start.

Some of the older folk sit around, impressing the hell out of the younger kids with stories about the drugs in the 'good old days' and whatnot. And unbeknownst to most of the guests, the new Surgeon General is at this party incognito: the youngest to ever take the position. He's a friend of Dr. Hager's. Hillary's regular John for the past three and a half years. Dr. Hager recommended Hillary to the new SG who's in town for a cancer therapy convention. The SG sits on the couch and awes the college kids with what he knows about marijuana and hints that it will soon be legal while puffing on a fat blunt. No one recognizes him through his disguise. Don't ask how I know, he says, but I have it on very good faith that soon any citizen twenty-one years of age can legally carry marijuana. Thanks to that elderly crusader, Ms. Jones. All the work she's done with NORML over the past eight years blah blah blah blah.

Of course he's referring to the old lady who's traveled around all over the country exposing how the government spread lies and rumors about marijuana and other natural drugs. She had well documented research on how moderate use of marijuana did not cause cancer, brain damage, or any other problems. Moderate is the key word here. Five time a day users, well, that's another story. No big surprise, but this idiot SG sure does know how to impress kids. So he's going to pull some strings to have marijuana legalized. Big deal. It's nothing like the strings you're going to pull if you pull off what you've got planned for later.

Naked people overrun your backyard and swimming pool like teenagers at a free party. I'm... wait a minute. Anyway, there's nothing quite like a hot tub while you're tripping. Some of the girls surround you, power and money attract pussy. No big secret there. One of the naked girls you recognize as being one of the girls who were here earlier. She's only about sixteen, you'd guess, but looks eighteen. Let's see, whose daughter was she? No matter. She joins you in the hot tub and looks like a sexy octopus with her long blond hair floating for a second on the water. You tell her this and she laughs.



Your arms float away on unseen wings and your bones bend like rubber bands. The concrete edge of the spa is the only thing holding you to earth or so you feel as you rest your head on it with a cute little dish on either side of you. The cloud of steam rising from the hot tub becomes a horned demon with goat's legs. Then it's Jesus. Then it's Ronald Reagan. Then it's Bart Simpson. You'll have to do some coke before this night's over. Coke and acid were always a good mix. Your middle fingers grow ten inches or more as you explore around inside their little beavers. What the hell was this girl's name? you wonder as she mounts you with the ease of a jockey on her favorite horse. Damn it. You didn't have time to grab a rubber. Oh well, she probably fucks ten guys a week. If she gets pregnant, who'll know it's yours? Cindy is fucking some guy on the diving board and it makes for an amusing show. The girl riding you starts to moan and groan and suddenly the whole universe is trapped in the end of your penis, only slowly released in spasms of marshmallow topping dreams at over the dance of life with its sticky floor. No place for a sock hop.

Then the cops show up. Inevitable. Everyone freaks out and runs inside. But you were ready for this and calmly slip your pants and shirt back on and go answer the door. The flashing red and blue lights transform the trees into hobgoblins and wizards. The angular police hats rock like elves' ears. The flashlights stab holes in the night, revealing other worlds where reality's more real than a brick wall across a freeway and you'd rather not see it right now.

"Hi, Shane," you greet the cop. He always comes into *Awakenings* for the free coffee you give to cops. It's sort of like getting a security guard for ten cents an hour. And his supervisor was at the party earlier for a brief while.

"Hi yourself," he says. "You got a lot of complaints from the neighbors, better start to wind it down."

"I'm already." It's not even twelve yet. "I'll bring everybody in and turn the music down."

"Alright, just keep the noise down or we'll have to be back," he winks. "And I hope no one drives home drunk or you could get in big trouble."

"Hell, Shane, I know that. That's why I told 'em they drink, they spend the night."

"That's different. Probably a good idea. Just hold the noise down."

"We will," you say and salute him goodnight while staring at a hundred foot penguin beating the shit out of the symbol of life under a street light. Good thing you have a privacy fence or the neighbors would have gaped about the nudity. Time for a quick toot. Where did that girl go? Oh well, there's plenty others. And later will be the grand finale.

So the party continues and continues to continue about until sunrise, when the Timothy Leary acid finally wears off. Some damn good shit. And so you sit admiring your masterpiece, the videotape of Hilary and the Surgeon General. He's in his mid-thirties, like you, but bald as an eagle, which makes him appear mature for his age. His toupee and fake beard have helped him remain incognito whenever he wants to have a little fun. Or so he brags to his close friends. He won't be bragging anymore after today when you ask him for a little favor. Maybe from now on he'll be a little more careful with whom he consorts.

People like spread all over your house like peanut butter on toast, sticky and crunchy. Of course a few of the guests did sneak off in the night to drive home under the influence of more synthetic chemicals than are produced at the Dow plant. So you go in the kitchen and fix some peanut butter on toast. Quick breakfast. Orange juice. <Gulp gulp>

You haven't blackmailed anyone since... ah, yes, the president of the university. God rest his soul, all two hundred forty greasy splattered pounds of it. The most hilarious part about that was when that little girl found part of his skull with eyeball intact floating in her swimming pool half a mile away from the explosion site. Or so the newspapers told everyone. Now *that's* entertainment!

So you enter your basement/lab/workshop eject the copy of the tape, and go upstairs to your bedroom. You swat Hillary on the ass, tell her good job and also to go in the other room while you talk to the Surgeon General who still isn't awake yet.

You don't talk, however—you show the video. You've rewound and played it about five times before he finally wakes up and sees himself in a new light. His face all glossy and sticky from munching Hillary's sloppy pussy. The gloss is made even shinier when viewed on screen. He panics and runs for the trash can with his wiener flapping about like a flag in a strong wind. Of course he starts ripping the tape to shreds, covering the floor with dark brown magnetic ribbon.

"That won't do you any good, of course, I have another copy," you explain. "Now calm down and listen. You could get rich if you pay close attention."

"To hell with getting rich, you son of a—" he stops the rhyme short as if rhyming were something beneath a person of his station. "How dare you try to ruin my reputation like this? 'Dr. Hager said you could be trusted!'" He tries to yell quietly so he won't be heard.

"Well, for the most part that's true. That is when large sums of money aren't involved. Listen up, I have a small favor to ask and then I'll leave you alone."

"I cannot be blackmailed."

"You do have a wife, don't you? Is she a swinger like you are?" you ask but he doesn't reply. "I didn't think so. Now, there's some research being done on organic foods, as you of course well know."

"Yes, of course, but—"

"Please, just listen. The majority of the public thinks that the benefits of organically grown foods are minimal and overpriced. They're right, of course."

"Of course, I see it now," he says. "The plot really isn't too difficult to understand and I'm a Harvard graduate."

"Good. But let me give you details of what I want you to tell the public."

"Shit," he breathes deep, giving in.

"You will announce to the public that organic food, especially dairy, eggs, and meats, such as are served at my restaurants, can actually increase one's life expectancy by as much as twenty-five percent." You smile at him like the mad genius you pretend to be and maybe are because you pretend to be.

"That won't work! You're crazy, you stupid bastard! No one will fall for some crazy load of crap like that!" He waves his hands about as if he can pull reason and logic from thin air.

"They will. Any idiot with half a brain will realize it's over-exaggerating just a tad much, but few people have half a brain. On the other hand, all people have eyes and would love to see a copy of the video. I can always sell it to a reporter."

"You fucking bastard. I'm telling you that no one will fall for it!"

"Just concoct some fancy-looking graphs and charts and make them pretty. People will believe it, trust me."

"Fine, but I'll do so if and only if the researchers agree to claim responsibility if the public finds out this is all bullshit."

"Already taken care of," you explain. "Since they're the ones proposing the results, there's no connection to you. The video only insures your cooperation. So just relax and enjoy life."

Thus part two of your plan has unfolded. The scientists studying organic foods were easy enough to buy out, the SG easy enough to blackmail and bribe. Blackmail alone wouldn't have worked, but everyone loves money and you. I give the surgeon general a decent reward should this little scam work. Now for part three: implementation.

The SG at a press conference announces he'll support the legalization of marijuana due to recent scientific studies showing moderate usage is relatively harmless. He explains the data in some detail - about half an hour's worth. Now he's got the world's attention. Pot-heads the world over celebrate while watching his announcement by smoking more pot in one day than the surgeon general has just stated is safe to smoke in one month. Then he tells the media about research that finds nicotine is the primary cause of cancer in tobacco users. That's believable - no big surprise there. And he will now support a new program for exercise and healthier eating habits, mainly by a low-fat diet and avoiding any dairy, eggs, or meat, that were raised by being fed pesticide tainted foods. He explains how fats act as reservoirs for toxic compounds, which lead to cancer and aging. The graphs taken from mice fed organic foods compared to those fed 'regular' foods are uncanny, so believable they make you want to run to the store and buy something organically grown.

And so the restaurant chain takes off overnight. Competition tries to cut in, but they're buying real organic food, which is much more expensive than fake organic food. The bar you run at night at the original *Awakenings* location takes off as well. During the day you close down the bar, except for maybe a wine list with a special organic wine, and at night you close down the kitchen, except for maybe nachos with, you guessed it, organic cheese.

And you'd be a son of a bitch if it hasn't been about ten years since you've made your ganja goo balls. And sold them. Marijuana isn't quite legal yet, but cops tend to ignore it now, deciding to focus more on the heavy drugs. Not that you would know anything about those, of course. Ahem. Let's move on, shall we? Good.

"How's it goin', Roy?" you greet the old farmer/butcher who delivers your shipments of organic meats to the restaurants.

"Been better," he tells you. "The Organic Foods Commission has been comin' by my farm. Luckily I haven't sprayed the fields in over a month, so I think everything's alright, but I may have to start goin' by the rules for awhile. Things got real hairy ever since that Surgeon General made his announcement last year - that damn hippie."

"Hmm..." you ponder as you help him carry in a few crates of eggs. "I hadn't thought of that. It's possible that means prices'll go up."

"Have to raise prices if I'm gonna be legit."

"Shh, here comes someone," you warn him.

One of the kitchen prep helpers comes in and gives you a hand with the boxes of meat.

"Well, Roy, I guess if you have to raise prices, that's just the cost of doin' business. And with as much money as we've been pullin' in lately, it's not gonna matter much."

"I guess you're right about that. Mind me askin' what'd you net last month?"

"All fifteen locations together netted around eighty-four thousand last month. That's after taxes, of course."

"Shit. I guess you can afford to spend a little more for organic meat."

"Yep. It's possible so," you mutter in a charming southern drawl while stacking the last box in the walk-in freezer and rotating the stock. You neglect to mention that you've already got plans to build your own organic food farm to supply your restaurants. Your dad knows a lot of Mexicans who work on his horse ranch, so okay, labor will not be a problem. The only question is should this be a legitimate organic farm or not? Maybe you better keep it legit, things are getting too big for you to pose out to a lawsuit now. And a bad reputation would sink your empire like that ice burg did to *Titanic*. God, that was a cheesy movie. And now they're coming out with *Titanic II: The Ghost Ship*.

Money. People will do anything for it. Yes, even publish this.

In dreams screams of dead babies with rabies  
run through my ears like a power drill  
Shine electric synthetic power every hour  
Nothing to be done about it but laugh  
I can't think of anything that rhymes with laugh  
Giraffe? Dead Giraffe? Nahhh  
A dog out in half? Uhhh Nope  
A two-headed calf?  
Come on, man, you can do better than that.  
Cyanide tainted coffee to quaff?  
No, not yet, man, it'll happen soon enough  
Besides you've still got a novel to write  
Leave the cyanide alone  
For now, anyway. Besides, the word  
quaff is a bit archaic, don't you think?  
You could say "drink"  
Yeah, well, I don't see you trying, ass-munch!  
Oh, now we're ripping off Beavis,  
how original. I think you should have ended  
this so-called poem of yours about 5 lines ago  
Or maybe not, even started it in the first place  
like every one of your sinking poems.  
you idiot  
Look here, you waste of bum wipe monkey spank  
fart-knocker. I'll rip off Beavis all I damn well  
please! And as for me being an idiot, it wasn't  
*me* who started writing this crap in the first  
place. **It was you!** Dumbass  
Heh heh heh heh heh Oh yeah

Age settles like a soft snow—cold and lifeless, though calming, peaceful—and fun to play in. Youth, it's said, is wasted on the young; they're incapable of exploiting their vigor and energy. The problem is that the majority of people age mentally as well as physically. Youth of mind far outweighs youth of body. You've proven that with all the damage you've done to yours over the years, but you always remain curious, always looking for something to get into. And your body's really not that bad off, surprisingly, with all the things you've put into it. Even at your age, you still manage to bring home a waitress every now and then. But monthly weekend vacations are where you take your real fun, buying young girls in poor countries like cattle and keeping them in houses like pets. In the long run it's cheaper than buying whores. And far safer as well. Especially so you won't end up with a paternity suit or paying alimony. You've got four girls in your collection and thinking about adding one or two more.

Hel-o. Snap, Snap. Mellina snaps her fingers in your face.

Shit. Damn it. I don't care how long you've been vice president—don't sneak up on me like that! you jump out of your chair, spilling coffee on the diagrams of chemical reaction mechanisms you've been working on for months. The customers around you give you dirty looks for disturbing their peace as they try to increase their life span with natural food.

Yeah, yeah, she insolently replies, knowing you can't fire her because she is just that good. I've been calling your name for the past thirty seconds. What are you so absorbed in?

Oh, I was just daydreaming. Sorry, sorry, you tell her and the customers around your favorite table—the one where you can get a good look at all the girls coming and going. Something's been eating at you lately. All the managers at the Awakenings branch offices are doing a pretty good job. The company's still turning a good profit, though not as much as it did when it first took off. Mellina's very loyal and capable of handling virtually all the paperwork. You have nothing left to do but kick back and rake in the cash. All four hundred six locations each pull in about fifty G's a year. You've got the loans paid off and the shareholders are happy. You could maybe expand more, but business has been declining. The restaurant really was a fad ten years back. Now people have subconsciously figured out they'd rather continue their crappy eating habits than live long and healthy lives. However, people still enjoy the food for the novelty and great flavor, even if the prices are a little steep. At almost twenty-five bucks per breakfast and thirty or more for lunch, that's almost twice the cost of a normal restaurant. But still, something's eating at you, telling you to hold off expanding the chain. Maybe it's divine intervention making you work on your new invention. "Well, what's it?" you ask Mellina. And Heather, you get a passing waitress' attention. Get me a coffee, Kenyan. Back.

First of all, you need a shave. Second, there're some men here who want to rent the restaurant for a business meeting.

A shave? Well, that can wait.

That's what you said yesterday. And the day before. "You look like shit," she leans over and whispers the last comment so the customers won't hear.

Great. Now what about these men?

Over there, she points to the other end of the restaurant.

So you wind your way through the noon lunch crowd, taking your coffee off Heather's hands as she passes.

Three old Japanese businessmen grace your casual coffeehouse/restaurant, three modern-day samurai dressed in their very best battle gear—Armani suits. The cost of their apparel could buy this entire restaurant or enough food for a starving, drought-stricken African country. Where's Sam Kennison when you need him? Oh, yeah—dead.

"Good day gentlemen. What can I do for you?" you greet them.

For a short time the expression on the leader's face betrays his disbelief that someone dressed as shabby as you could be the king of *Awakenings*, the health food restaurant/coffeehouse chain. Well, if old blue jeans aren't good enough, they can just take themselves off to a better place than this one.

"Hello," he finally says with a guttural accent. "I am Akira Ezuhara and this is Takayoshi Masuda and Hideki Koyanagi. Mr. Masuda is a shareholder in your company."

You shake their hands, wondering what business proposition they have for you. "Shareholder?" you ask, suddenly remembering the name. "Of course, Mr. Masuda! I remember now." It takes you back about five years, when the restaurant was at its peak and you decided to go public with the company. The IPO (initial public offering) on the OTC stock exchange went rather well; you sold forty percent of the company to raise money for your research lab, keeping fifty-four percent for yourself and the rest as benefits to managers and other higher employees. Mr. Masuda bought about a fourth of *Awakenings*. "You've been satisfied with the stock's performance, I hope?"

"Yes, though it could be a little better. However, we are not here to discuss your restaurant chain. My associates and I will be having a small business meeting this Sunday and I would like to hold the meeting here if we could reserve the restaurant from two in the afternoon to, I hate to say it, late at night. I am not certain what time."

"This Sunday? hmmm. Alright. I do need to know how many people you expect and what to serve. But first I'd like to ask you a quick question if you don't mind?"

"Not at all."

"I was going to take a shareholder vote to see if everyone would rather see the earnings as dividends or an increase in the restaurant chain. I personally don't think it's a good time to expand, so I'd prefer to start paying a dividend. If you say that's okay, then I won't need to take a vote because your twenty-five percent..."

"Twenty-three point six," he corrects.

"Um... Yes, well, anyway, if I just get your okay, then I won't have to take a vote because, aside from myself, you own a larger share than anyone else. I just want to keep the shareholders happy."

"The dividend will be fine. But about this Sunday, there will be fifteen of us and we would like you to keep one cook and two waitresses on staff while we eat. And if you wouldn't mind opening the bar up as well?"

"Absolutely," you agree, and too happy to be entertaining your largest shareholder. *Awakenings*' stock really is overvalued right now and this would be a perfect time to sell. If he dumped all his shares on the open market, the price would plummet and your stock would lose a lot of its worth. "Sunday it is. I have my best cook here. Is there anything you might need for the meeting? Overhead projector? Slide projector? Chalkboard? Anything at all, you just let me know. And here's my card with my personal number. Call me anytime you need anything. Mr. Masuda. And that goes for you, gentlemen as well. What were your names again? Sorry, I'm bad with names."

"I am Akira Ezuhara and this is Hideki Koyanagi. Hideki does not speak English." Mr. Ezuhara is obviously impressed by your eagerness to serve and perhaps now he sees why someone looking as scruffy as you, in your blue jeans, T-shirt, sneakers, and four-day beard is a powerful businessman.

"Mr. Ezuhara and Mr. Koyanagi," you repeat their names to help you remember. "Nice

meeting you and if there's anything else.

Yes. There's, Mr. Ezuhara speaks up. We want *only* one cook and two waitresses here to serve at our business meeting next Sunday. And we would like to meet them now. Or at least within the next forty-five minutes or so while we eat lunch. And also I insist on absolute privacy during our meeting.

'Privacy?' you gave him a puzzled look, then shrug. 'Privacy it is then.'

Karen brings their food to them on a large tray, sets it on the tray stand, and passes their appropriate plates to them and refills their hot herbal tea. You bid them a good meal and day, then return to your table, collect your papers, notes, and photocopies of chemistry journal articles, stuff them in a couple of folders and carry them to your office. Let's see, who can work the business meeting Sunday and is available to meet them now. That's easy enough to take care of. Heather and Kendra can waitress and Robert's the only cook available. He knows a little something about Japanese cuisine, so that should help. And all three of them are working now, so you tell them what's up and briefly introduce them to the businessmen. Then you disappear into your office where you place a call to your cousin so he can work out the details of fixing with the SEC (Securities and Exchange Commission) for paying a dividend as well as Awakenings' second stock split. Lastly you have to make up some 'We will be closed Sunday' to host a private party signs to warn your customers. As you tape the signs in the window the Japanese businessmen march out, satisfied with their lunch, tea, your hospitality, and the staff you selected to serve at their business meeting.

But what on earth is all this privacy about? Hmm. And what was with meeting the waitresses and cook? Hmm. You, I just have to wait to find out. Time to brush up on your Japanese over the next few days.

Some traditions keep going like a bad disease. Social herpes. Poetry. Every Tuesday night it's the same Goddamn thing: people yelling 'Look at me! See how pathetic I am! My pain and joy are the only things that matter! You and your little world mean nothing!'

They all smoke and drink, many of them do drugs, and only half of them work shitty jobs. The other half don't even work. All they do is take drugs and write poetry about taking drugs and self-drugs so they can make money with which to buy more drugs to take and write poetry about taking. Two young kids, a little less than twenty, fire up a joint an older friend purchased for them at the bar. The smoke spirals away in a swirl pattern that looks similar to the ones shaved into the r heads and tattooed on the r noses.

You usually avoid Tuesday nights for this reason only. But you had to go over the books with a fine tooth comb to see which of your managers to suspect of ripping you off. If they can't at least turn a twenty-five percent profit, then there's a good chance they're skimming some cash off the top. You've successfully prosecuted four managers in twenty years of business.

The lights are dimmed. The candles on the tables are lit. Mellina introduces the first poet. He's an old fart who's been showing up to the poetry readings here ever since they were started by Mick. He gets right down to it and goes off about the wonders of the universe and mankind's purpose in it all, and how we're destroying the precious planet in much the same way he's destroying the English language. Ancient gods and physics and toadstools and hydrocarbons and heroin. On and on he goes for about fifteen minutes. The yawns and irritated looks start to fly. He becomes all defensive and preachy like he's got great lessons to teach us and if we don't heed his esoteric wisdom then we're in for bring trouble, vassiree. He receives very little applause, as usual.

A couple of young high school girls next attempt to try their hand at pretending to want



to be creative and brave but somehow miss the mark. (Like a blind archer.) Everyone claps, as they must to inspire the youth of tomorrow to express their tiny little emotions in big ways. When the girls get out in the real world they'll see what little value emotions are to people. You certainly found out when you were their age. And if all they know how to do is express emotion then they will be truly worthless. Except maybe as a grocery clerk, waitress, housewife or whore.

A young, angry, pissed-off rebel takes the mic next, screaming of poverty and injustice, a junkie's right to be a reflection of the cesspool our world has become. Every so often he starts a fresh paragraph with 'I'd rather worship heroin than Jesus Christ.' Well, at least he's funny and a crowd-pleaser.

A purple haired surrealist attempts to confuse everyone with blue elephants and machine guns firing gumdrops around the space inside your left nostril until the rooster crows and the moon comes down to say 'cheese.' *Whatever*, you think, not confused or impressed at all except for wondering why his mother didn't get an abortion.

The world's worst poet has got to be this one. The *thees* and *thous* get on your nerves the first time he speaks. And he goes on and on about love and hate, using the most awful rhymes that would make Billy Shakespeare commit suicide. To help block it out you talk restaurant talk with a waitress: Napkins to be folded, the patio needs cleaning, etc.

It's sad, but the fashion is making a comeback. Well, at least they're not hippies. A slightly plump girl with jet-black hair, eye shadow, mascara, lipstick, long dress, leather boots, and stockings stands before the small crowd. She's a newbie, apprehensive, nervous, and uncertain if her performance can meet the high standards of the famous *Awakenings Coffeehouse* poetry reading. She's wearing so much black she looks darker than her own shadow cast by the spotlight. Her friends in the audience give her a little support and she begins with a shaky voice.

I will not be your toy, she starts off her poem. Already you know by that one sentence what the entire content of this so-called poem will be. She'll go on and on about how some asshole abused and used her and shrill over her like she was toilet paper and flushed her away without a second thought. As if many women don't treat men the same way. It's just that most men have too much machismo pride to admit something like that. And you were right, every paragraph starts out 'I will not be your toy.' Typical of so many poems these days, they all have to repeat the same sentence over and over again so it sticks in your brain like fried eggs left forgotten on a cast iron skillet above a high flame for twenty minutes.

What catches you by surprise is the sudden realization that she's talking about a rape experience. It takes you back. Way back. Way, way back. Ahhh, the good old days. Back to all the crimes and all the times hidden in the dark, dirty corners of your mind for no one to find but you, to be replayed at the push of a button. You do your damndest to repress a smile while trying to ignore the whore, yet listening, glistening with curiosity. So that's how it feels. Big deal. A little pain never killed anyone. You should know that. The universe is a cold, dark, lonely place, the average temperature only a few Kelvin. Why she thinks she's special because she's experienced a little pain is incomprehensible. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Thanks Nietzsche.

**And I will never again be your toy!!** she finishes, strong and full of conviction, entirely transformed from the timid little girl who went up on stage. So that's all poetry is good for? You'd rather they take it to a support group. When she lifts her dress and shows the audience her tiny thigh, teen-aged twat, led to get her with titanium twine is when she finally shocks everyone. Even you. Tears of rage and pain slide down her cheeks and the audience is

stunned by her performance. Though not as stunned as they would have been twenty five years ago, no genital mutilation has become quite the rave with teenagers. It's become more the norm than the exception to have one's sexual organ transformed into something almost, but not quite entirely unlike anything it originally resembled. 'Unsanitary?' Definitely, but anything for fashion.

Her friends rush the stage to hug and congratulate her. It would be perfect for an Oprah Winfrey show, except that fat cow died of a heart attack many years back. Thank God. Well, there's always Jerry Springer.

The lights go up and all the people breathe a sigh of relief and come up to the counter for refills. Manning the cappuccino machine and refilling coffees are a few of the chores you don't mind. Counting money is one also.

Double Cappuccino. Exarrem coffee. A familiar looking man orders.

Don't get many requests for that one anymore. You try to strike up a conversation with a fan of your creation.

Then you notice. It's him. It's been over ten years since Melina kicked him out for some vulgar poem or another, but you'd still recognize the sonuvabitch. Even with his beard and sunglasses you'd know him. Though it can't be him, he hasn't aged a day. He's a crude bastard, but one of the few poets you ever liked. And at least he spends money, unlike so many of these 'poets'. But whether it was the content of his poems or the style you like more, you never could figure out why you liked his bizarre poetry. He hands you a ten. As his left hand closes around the mug you can barely hear the turning of bionic gears.

'On the house,' you offer. He shrugs, pockets the ten, and walks off slurping his drink. Ungrateful little shit. Asshole hasn't changed at all. And never will.

Melina kills the lights, a mercy killing, and announces the second round of poetry. The poetry fans come back inside from the small garden on the back patio. The candles and the spotlight communicate to each other in some unfathomable way. After that crazy bitch flashed her mutilated beaver to everyone in the last set, everyone's hoping this will be a little more relaxing. It will have to be. Won't it?

'Nemesis?' 'Is Nemesis here?' Melina asks the audience. And wouldn't luck just have it? It's him, going by some new stage name like an anonymous stripper. He walks slowly, purposefully from the back of the restaurant. What will he say this time? He takes off his sunglasses that were protecting the light from his eyes. If only there was a way to protect the audience from words that burn like acid. Few people here have seen or heard him before, and those that have probably don't recognize him. He levels his gaze on the rape victim with a devious look. And his monotone, baritone voice sinks into everything.

'Who's got the wire cutters?' And that's just the beginning of his poem. The girl breaks into tears and the audience is even more shocked at his callous insensitivity than they were at the girl showing them her privates. He continues speaking loudly in the mic. 'Pain's only in your mind where you'll find you've left behind your sanity, is stored for another day when you can rip the memories from your sleeve like a merit badge you've become too old to wear and finally realize no one will care. Not in his world, and not in the next. Perplexed by the hand you've been dealt? Felt it's not fair? We come to Las Vegas where we'll take your lost vague ass. And after we've had it you can take it to the shrink if you think it will help. You'd let out a yelp of pain if it happened again and there would be nothing you could do but writh like a lamb on the slaughtering block it out or dwell in it, again it won't matter. Welcome to the world with its cruelty unfurled. Remember its face, you will see it everywhere. Everywhere

Now that your eyes are no longer sewn shut

Do you get a thrill out of trying to be special? You're not, it happens to everyone  
Everyone. In some form or another. And all the attention you get will not turn back the clock.  
So the next time it happens, try to **bite off HIS COCK!!!!**

Two male poets rush him and a fight breaks out. One he kicks in the groin, the other is rendered helpless as his mechanical left hand closes tight around his attacker's windpipe.

I've killed many better than you, he says levelly with a man's grin. You round the counter and grab the first sharp object at hand.

Let him go. Now! you tell this Nemesis poet while gripping a kitchen knife. He drops the offended poet on the floor and walks out under your cautious escort while several of the pansy poets rush to help their friends sprawled helpless on the floor like newborn kittens. God! Why do poets have to be so fucked up?

Long after the poetry reading you give the restaurant the once over. Everything looks okay. Except the bathroom trash. Dumb-ass pot head busboys always forget that one little thing. Oh well. Turn lights off, set alarms, lock door. As you walk to the parking lot, briefcase swinging, you overhear a girl crying a little ways off. She's sitting on a bench down the street. Someone's with her so. Life is too weird. As unbelievable as it is, it's that girl with the sewn-up pussy, not only sitting with that bastard poet piece-of-shit that insulted her, but crying on his shoulder as well. Man, if that bitch is stupid enough to hang around creeps like that, maybe she deserves to get raped. The last thing you hear her say is, Thank you. Jesus! Even the poetry reading wasn't this nauseating. Life cannot possibly get any weirder than this.

Sunday is the day that I te died, crawled in a dark, lonesome cave and hibernated like you're doing now, physically, socially, and emotionally. There's no springtime thaw. The world goes by and all you can do is stagnate in a prison cell of hate and disgust, waiting for more power by the hour and Goddammit, stop rhyming. Breathe deep and stare out the closet you're in to try and make sense of everything as you're well hidden behind a wall, staring out a vent at the church crowd finally dispersing like a. Lets not go there again.

A few loyal Sunday regulars are turned away as the Nikkei samurai put up defenses around your castle, chasing away the dishwasher, both busboys, the third waitress, and second cook. The kitchen's left dirty, but you promised them a full day's pay. Silverware's left unwrapped in cloth napkins, but the girls obey your orders to obey the businessmen like good little medieval serfs. Confused, and disoriented, but they keep their heads so they can keep their heads. No Shogun style decapitations today. Oh well. Only the chosen three remain: one fat cook and two skinny waitresses.

The closet where the old heater used to be lies behind a panel in the wall. It's hard to see if one's not looking for it. Cramped? Yes, a little, but enough space for you to sit down and lean back with a DVD vid-cam and enough curiosity to choke every housecat in the western hemisphere.

The greatest business skill one can learn is how to drink. Kendra pours out sake after sake from a hot bottle and they toast several rounds to success, to prosperity and to revenge? The fifteen men are silenced by Mr. Shift. What was his name? Ezuhorrito? Eggsburrito? Oh well. We will discuss business later, he says.

Drink, drink, drink. Munch, munch, munch. Ever so gracefully like a party of princesses. They could put Emily Post to shame. One of the young ones has a bit much to drink and makes a pass at Heather. He receives a severe reprimand from her, his boss, and about

everyone. Profuse false apologies spew from his lips. Dweeb can i handle the booze

Two hours pass before everyone is fed, satiated, and socialized. A half hour passes before the waitress can clean the mess. <Clunk, clunk> you can hear the dishes stacking ever higher in the kitchen. Abu, the dishwasher, won't be happy in the morning and will want a bonus. Worth every penny. Robert barely manages to clean the kitchen, his large bulk slowing him down. But that's okay, never trust a skinny cook. Three exhausted workers exit stage left and left the stage exit.

Now the play of big players begins. The blinds are pulled down. Cell phones are pulled out. Suitcases pop open, equipment comes out. What the hell are they. Shit. You manage to switch off the vid cam just in time. Sensor and detector are two of the English words that they speak. They sweep the place for bugs and surveillance devices. And don't find any. Whew! They check the restaurant security camera, trace the wire back to your office, and pick the lock. Nosey bastards have to get into everyone's business, don't they? Ahem. Yes, well anyway. They laugh to find the camera's not real.

So you won't be able to record the business meeting's business. Nor from the looks of these hardball bastards would you want to blackmail them. But how in hell will you figure out what they're saying without a recording to translate later on. Let's try.

Two weeks      Revenge      Sixty seven years      Dormant      To conquer      Sun  
Money      Brought down      Buy everything      Applause      Reviewing now      This week sell  
In one month buy      But what will we buy?      Charts and numbers shine on a blank wall from  
which they removed a painting of broken circles worth ten thousand bucks because the artist  
died. Death kicks ass. But listening to six hours of Louis Rukesser wannabes doesn't

Your pen and paper, but writing down all the details and best buys they mention, which may change in the next few weeks. The lower limits are set, but anything can change. But what if Dell could make IBM or Dell sell for a mere forty dollars a share, the cost of a decent lunch?

They open the restaurant's side doors to let in several militant-looking servants carrying slabs that must weigh a ton. Gold? Platinum? A new revolutionary computer. That must be it! They set them on top of strong metal poles that are set into heavy bases. It looks like an unassembled billiard table. They can't be here to play pool. No. Lead. Satellite blockers. One more instrument is pulled out. Then hedges. Name hedges? No. Hmmm. Click. click. click. click. Click. click. What the fuck? They maneuver one final box underneath the lead table. Seven in the side pocket. They open it. Click. click. click. click. click. click. It sounds like an orgy of crickets on speed. "Shit!" Genger counters.

Twenty kilometer radius. Words you understand. Fucking bastards. 'You have to get out of here and let someone'. The boxes closed. All badges are yellow none black. Black means death. Two weeks. New York. Three weeks. Los Angeles. Twenty five days. Chicago and London. Washington D.C. 'a young flunky asks. We harm our enemies, not help them. Ha ha ha ha. Make World Trade Center look like pencil. Ha ha ha ha.

Firm time. No popcorn. 'Savages.' Old film. Hiroshima. Nagasaki. The plot is businesslike professional detachment. The aftermath. Bodies burned. Skin melted. Buildings leveled. Piles of the dead. Birth defects months later. Popcorn would sure be nice.

So that's the plan. Kill about forty million. Buy everything when everyone's screaming 'Sell! Sell! Sell!' Except there will be no more Wall Street. But things will happen. The world will find a way to do business somehow. If you let it that's God! You have to tell someone. But if you go to the authorities these people will find a way to kill you. Maybe you could give an anonymous tip, maybe you could. Or then. Maybe. Humm.

### **Splat.**

There's no God today: He was hit by the bus.  
7:30 a.m. on His way to work  
The ambulance was far too late  
Children laughed and played around Him  
tugged at His beard and called Him names  
while His ribs fluttered up and down.  
I laughed too. Went to a pay phone  
and called the church.  
Told them they were out of business.  
They said: Au contraire, mon frere—  
now we don't have to split the profits  
with that fat Old Bastard."  
I went home, made a cup of tea,  
and put on some Bach.  
And wondered  
Can God be reincarnated?

Economy is such a strange beast that even Dr. Seuss would have been hard pressed to draw it. It's a male that only the most powerful men can beat on. Timing and knowing when and where to strike are everything. One hundred fifty million grows to four and a half billion overnight and suddenly coffee, food, and pussy are no longer the most important things in the world anymore. You stare out the window across the fields of the farm your father left you fifteen years ago. From the hill looking out over a twenty mile view everything is serene and peaceful. The farm equipment was funded by the sale of your mother's estate when she and your half sister were killed in that car crash. DAMM Drunks Against Mad Mothers.

Four and a half billion grows to five hundred billion as your super lightweight fire-resistant construction polymers take off and cover the globe giving the forests a huge break and damn near burying the lumber industry. And the R&D team at your chemical plant pulled off a doozie with that fluorine based polymer gel doped with silicon boride that absorbs vast amounts of hydrogen gas eliminating the danger and cost of high pressure hydrogen tanks. Thus no more polluting gasoline automobiles. A good thing too—greenhouse effect causing that one hundred twenty eight degree temperature high three summers back with enormous waves of grasshopper plagues had crowds of environmentalists and doomsayers screaming on every single street corner. And rightly so—fat and old people were dropping dead on every other street corner. **Bring out your dead! Bring out your dead!** Draught and starvation even reached the agricultural lands of America's breadbasket and China's fertile rice pannes. Desserts advanced while rainforests were pushed back. But that's all history now. Thanks to you.

Now you're a hero. How does it feel? The scenic beauty of your farm out the office picture window distracts you from the computer screen. Waves of email from business giants all over the world. People wanting money and all you want is one moment's peace. Or two.

Okay first message. A shipment of food and medical equipment you sent to Africa just arrived. Good PR. Two million bucks down the drain. Should keep the little starving jungle bunnies alive for a few more days. A live to work the gold and diamond mines. Diamonds, the hardest substance known to man and known better to woman. And all people really want them for is ornamentation. That alone convinces you the human race will some day die as it deserves. But not before you bleed it dry. Those crazy Japs didn't think about the De Beers' monopoly on the diamond market when they nuked London ten years back. You did.

Those psychotic little Nip bastards. Of course it's obvious that revenge had little or nothing to do with that nuclear terrorism scam of theirs—it was all about money. And if they can justify their overzealous greed by saying it's revenge that they were after for wrongs done to Japan by the United States about seventy years prior then so be it. It's sort of like an employee who wants to steal from his boss and will find any excuse to do so.

He treated me bad. He should have paid me what I was worth the fat greedy pig. Etc etc. There's always some excuse. Now if those Japs *really* wanted to hurt America, if they *really* wanted vengeance what they should have done was struck at the heart and soul—a target that would have made the human mind scream out in anguish. A target such as, say Disneyland.

Ah, memories. At least the dust clouds cooled the earth off a degree or so for a few years. But when the dust settled, as they say, the greenhouse effect arose back in full force.

El Niño. Bah! What a crock! Crops and people died faster than at any time since the Black Plague. Everyone pointing fingers and everyone driving cars. Everyone making excuses and no one making so tutions except for cyan de and mass murder rampages on a quiet summer's afternoon.

Sir line four. It's your son, Tera informs you over the intercom phone.

"Uh... like, which one?" you shouldn't have to ask. She's a little dense, but has the tits to compensate.

"Philippe."

"From Chile?"

"Peru."

"What's he want?"

"Uh... like, to speak with you," she mocks—gutsy broad. You think you just might like her. "He wants to know when you'll come see him."

"When I next feel like screwing his mother's little sister," you tactfully omit. "Probably in a few weeks. Tell him I'm busy now," you concede to see him only because you've got business to take care of then. Coffee plantations reporting their quarterly profits. Jorge Campos still runs that, even at age seventy. In less than ten years will you still be as functional?

The world is restructuring itself and finally stabilizing. Population's constant at eight billion, down from nine-and-a-half. People are using birth control and even the Vatican has consented it's better than destroying ourselves. An enlightened era and this is just the dawn. Health-nuts abound. "We have to live long to see the New World blossom." Space stations are growing in space to grow new crystals and medicines. Peace in the Middle East. Who'd have thought? Teens interested in science instead of drugs, health instead of rock-n-roll, the future instead of carefree sex.

Things are just a little bit too rosy. You hit the switch on the laser disk remote. An o die.

*If God had a name, what would it be?*

There's something missing in life. You stare out the window at the world and all the possibilities and all the beauty masking its cruelty. A feeling of déjà vu taps you on the shoulder.

"Sir. More calls. Amy, line one. She wants to thank you for the donation to her dance company and says she's building a stage in your honor."

*just a stranger on the bus*

"And Dr. Wheeler from the Atlanta Medical R&D team. He wants your okay on surpassing the budget that was set for his team."

"Thanks, Dr. J.J. Tera. Tell Amy she's welcome but I'm busy right now and I'll talk to her some other time. And put Dr. Wheeler through on-screen."

"One more thing. I need to run to town for office supplies. There anything I can get for you?"

"No. Well, yes. Pick up some coffee at the restaurant. Anything but decaf."

"There anything you need me to do first before I go?" she asks, knowing what her real job is.

"Um... Well, maybe later. Let Cindy handle the phones. And put Dr. Wheeler through."

The furry face of a typical generic scientist pops up on the computer screen. You



see behind him an office of cheesy gadgets and a periodic table. He's wearing a nice, white lab coat. It has no stains on it, so he's not the one really doing the lab work; he's just the administrator. And, for some reason, he thinks he's stylish dressing like a nerd.

"Get to the point, Wheeler."

"Um, Sir, we're on the verge of a breakthrough, but we need more money for supplies and equipment."

"How much? And remind me just exactly what project you're on."

"Neurological reconstruction. Helping people with spinal injuries and brain..."

"Ah yes," you interrupt, "that project. Well, why more money and how much?" you lean back, pressing your fingertips together, knowing he wishes he could superglue them together.

"We've been using rats, Sir, but they can't handle it. When we activate..."

"What do you need the money for and how much are we talking about here?"

"Chimpanzees. We need at least ten. That's about a million dollars."

"And what's wrong with rats? Or cats? Or dogs? The environmentalists and eco-terrorists will shit all over us if we try to use chimps."

He winces at the word "shit." With the Brave New World has come the intolerance of "bad language." "We need animals with a large..."

"And only chimps will do."

"Chimps or humans. But the FDA..."

"I know, I know. I hate those son-of-a-..." You pause and he smiles, knowing you all too well. "You'll get the money as long as you can keep a tight lid on the chimp thing. We'll, my accountants are flying in any minute and I've got work to do. And so do you—if this project doesn't yield results within the year, it'll be scrapped. I'm trying to put every other penny in the three-D molecular quantum circuit chip research, as you know. Goodbye and good luck."

"Good..." the screen silences as you hit the button; his face disappears, and the email message list pops back up. "Stupid pee-on. Medical and biotech research is not a big thing anymore. People have learned to be happy with the fact that they're expendable. Enlightenment's not easy."

In your desk drawer is some of the best cocaine in the world. Once every week or two, sneak a little. Not one bit more. Self-control is the ultimate test of a strong mind.

Closing one nostril with a finger and blowing your nose in the air to clear the way for the fine powder, propelling a mist spray of mucus and a few chunks of things you'd rather not know about into the office atmosphere, you suddenly feel an odd pressure behind your eyes. Stars explode around you. Too much coffee. Not enough sleep. You opt to put the coke away.

"How long?" you ask your doctor in his tiny, sterile examination room with the cold metal exam table on your almost bare butt giving you goose bumps.

"At this early stage it's hard to tell. Three months. Maybe six. It's in a location where it can't be removed, but I suggest an immediate chemotherapy program starting now. That's if..."

"Let's get to it. And spare no expense," you remind him. "But you already know that, of course. And if I only have three months to live..." you pause.

"Yes?"

"Get me out of this cheap fucking gown."

## An Ode to Brussels Sprouts

God came to Me in a dream. I told Him **Get the fuck out!!! This is MY dream and I don't want YOU in it!!!!**"

He said He was dropped by 'cause He wanted to get stoned, relax, and listen to some tunes. He wondered what was wrong with Me.

I said: Fuck You and Your hippie 'peace-love-brother' organic weed bullshit. **I want to feel ALIVE, not catatonic.** I want 'peyote'. I want acid & heroin. I want to shoot up cocaine and crystal meth. I want something that gives Me the genius of a 1/2-starved lion, the visions of Nusrat-Fatima, the thoughts of Adolph Hitler & Charles Manson. **I want something that makes Me see GOD!!!!** Or I don't mean You. I mean a God who knows what He's doing, a God that knows how to make a universe that's worth living in, not this rat-s-ass sorry excuse for a universe that You cobbed together one boring afternoon. What was the 1<sup>st</sup> Law of Thermodynamics Your idea of some kind of *joke*? I mean Jesus Christ, what kind of a God are You anyway?

God pulled out His wallet.

No, I don't want to see a picture of Jesus Christ. That skinny little whiny brat kid of Yours, a ways to living people how they should live. I don't give a flying fuck on a trapeze if He died on the cross for My sins. For My sins. For MY sins?!" If *He* died on the cross for *My* sins then that is the Son of-A-Bitch go off to gh. I mean if Jesus died for My sins then You better go back in time and do it right. We get 21<sup>st</sup> Century on His ass. All His arms & legs slowly burned off with blowtorches over several weeks. And every time He almost goes into shock We'll inject adrenaline into His heart with a 12 needle. Then We'll crush His balls in a vice & pour a hive of angry red ants all over His face. Then when there's nothing left of Him but a blind torso with charcoal stumps We'll starve Him to death while playing AC/DC Back in Black through 100 MW speakers over & over again. And then when He's almost starved to death We'll pour 10 pots of scalding coffee down His throat with a gravity bong. Then He'll shit His life out just like Elvis: a death fit for Kings. Then We'll skin the corpse & sew it up & with the diseased, rotting skin of Christ We'll make a helium balloon & parade through the streets. And after the parade we'll give the Jesus-skin-balloon to a group of necrophiles, like Marilyn Manson's band, to use as a blow-up sex doll."

And all of that torture still would not be be punishment enough to atone for all of My sins. **NOW LEAVE!!!!**"

God shrugged His shoulders, shook His head, and left My dream.

I rolled over in My sleep and farted a hole-hearted explosion. Then calculated *exactly* how many of them it would take to equal the Big Bang. It to the power of 42. But then before the Big Bang, where would all those Brussels sprouts have come from in the first place? *Which came first, the Big Bang or the Brussels Sprout?* The question drove Me near mad and I awoke sweaty and screaming: **"Who is this 'God' and what is HE doing in MY universe?!"**

The back door was wide open, a cold breeze was blowing in, and My 45-ounce of hydro was gone. So if anyone actually ever sees this *God*, then You tell the Son-of-a-Bitch He owes Me a hundred twenty five bucks. And I want it NOW!!!! Or I'm gonna open up a can o' Whoop Ass with His name all over it!!! And I'll show Him dreams like He never imagined'!!!!!!

The restaurant. Still the same, but it looks so different. Not too often you get the chance to come out here anymore. But now it's not like you have any terribly pressing matters to attend to. People try not to stare, but of course do. And then pretend as though they were looking at something besides your pale, withered body and bald head. The elite force bodyguards on either side of you are relaxed with nothing to worry about. 'Who would kill a dying man?' They try to make themselves look important, like they're earning their pay. At least they're loyal.

So many times you've sat here at your favorite table and watched people dine on healthy, organically grown food sold at twice cost, thinking they'll live longer by doing so. And maybe they might, but at one hundred percent profit, what do you care? And what do you care if it makes zero percent profit? With your other industries expanding about ten percent every year, the restaurant chain is only a drop in the bucket. The girls walk by, as they have forever, with trays of drinks and food. And they try to pretend like nothing's wrong, like you're not dying. You've even had one or two of them. It reminds you of Henry, the first one. She's long since seen the error of her ways and joined some crazy neo-Christian religion or another. You wonder if you have a soul. Shift man, get a grip. Everyone dies. The place is quiet today. Dying people don't make for good restaurant decor. Not like you care. The place could go bankrupt and you'd barely feel it. Christ, you can't even count all your wealth. And still it won't save you.

Quit thinking about it. It doesn't matter. Nothing does. Dying's almost a relief. So why are you fighting it? The cure that isn't working is worse than the disease that it's barely slowing down. You can't even enjoy the cappuccino, no matter that the stupid barista broke the crest. Again. If you had the energy, you'd make it yourself. If only everything didn't taste like electric metal and generic salsa from Taco Hell. Damn chemo. Death never used to seem real. And now that it does, it's almost humorous.

A pulse of pressure makes you wince. Anti-inflammatories aren't working. 'Increase dosage?' No. Eventually there's a point where they'll have to quit working. This is it. Won't be long now and you'll get the peace you deserve. That's if no doctor or scientist can cure you. It's not like they aren't trying, like mad. Especially because of the ten billion dollar offer you made.

Four more weeks. Soon they'll hook you up to a heroin IV that you can control and you'll drift into never-never land before drifting in a oblivion. The lawyers are already fighting over the will and you're not even dead yet. Vultures. Melina gets the restaurant. Felix gets the farm, each of your children, however many there are now, get five hundred thousand apiece. Not much, but not a penny more. They'll all waste it foolishly, more likely than not. The majority of your wealth, what will you do with it? The diamond and gold mines will go to CEOs and engineers and even the mineworkers. The chemical plants and biotech companies will be split up among the top twenty executives. And even some of the lesser workers will get shares. But you can't let idiots gain control. Everyone's just waiting now.

So many times you've

Anything you need? Melina asks gently, almost with tears in her eyes. It hurts her to see you like this, why you'll never know. You stand for about everything she's against: capitalism, sexism, greed, power. On and on. But you have to admit you've done some damn good things in your life, even if they were accidental. But it's irrelevant as long as you benefit.

No, Melina. Thanks for looking after me, though. Go ahead and take over my computer in the office.

Twenty-five years after I don't need it? Thanks, she gives you a devious smile.

I know it's ancient, but you never know when you might need the records on it. It might even have antique value. Here's the key. You fumble around with it but can't

'Here, let me sir.' Andy the bodyguard/super soldier/mercenary/murderer unhooks the key and hands it to her, proud to do something that doesn't require breaking anyone's neck.

"And the computer password."

'Yes?' She raises her eyebrow.

Password. Lower case. 'Everyone laughs and for a moment you feel as though everything could not be better, as though you'll live forever.' But then, 'I'd like to be alone for a few minutes, if that's alright.'

'Sure.' Thank you for everything, she pats your hand and goes in the kitchen where you won't see her cry on some waitress' shoulder. Stupid sentimental feminazi should be supervising the restaurant or going over the books, not worrying about you.

Where were you? Ah yes. So many times you've sat at this table, even when the place was a tiny remnant of a coffee shop. Sitting and scheming and dreaming of more ways to make money than every housewife in America can think of ways to spend it. Now you have that money. And it won't do you a Goddamned bit of good.

It's not that you haven't lived a full life—you have. Haven't you? Oh, of course you have. Think of all the people you've met right here in the restaurant, some of them very famous. Prize-winning physicists, and pro-football player sister and brother. Too bad he O.D.'ed on coke. Not that you would know anything about that, of course. Ah well, at least his sister's working on your new molecular level, three-D circuit project. Chemical vapor deposition, CVD, becomes art when she builds a designer crystal.

In two dimensions logical pathways of zeros and ones perform gigantic routines of decision-making laid out by the engineer. In three dimensions the logic and decision-making become a nightmare jungle no longer ruled by binary code. Certain crystalline compounds made just so are tiny little brains that can store and manipulate vast amounts of data so quickly that—Except it doesn't work. Yet. The problem is getting the info into the circuits and output back from it. The human brain is similar, though much larger and less efficient. However the human brain already comes with more than enough working pathways to give every normal person a nice start in life. Crystals don't have that. And that's where the problem lies.

Ah, but if the chips eventually can be made to work, the world will. Again, it doesn't matter. Because you won't be here. Ah well, you've lived a good life. Haven't you? God, though, if that little trigger bitch can get the computer chip to work, everyone in the world will bow down and—It won't matter. Fuck.

Two women herd a bunch of four-year-olds past the restaurant window. They all hold on to a rope with handles. Tied to a chain on the way to the slave market for auction. Sold to work in fields and sweatshops or—or on their way to the Thanksgiving Day parade a couple of blocks over. Free candy from Santa at the end of it all.

**Aarghh! Jesus!**" you scream as the pain stabs yet again. Pressure on the brain. Tumor's swelling.

Sir. You need to get back to the hospital. Andy tells you. It's obvious he's right, but it won't do you any good.

Later. Have the helicopter fly in and wait. I'm going to talk to Calvin.

The walk might do some good. It takes all your effort to stand. Goddamn chemo. Jesus, you could just go camping at the New York City Crater to get the radiation that's killing you faster than the tumor in your brain.

The Chinese restaurant that used to be a strip joint. The Mexican restaurant that's been there forever. The bar that's closed down from high alcohol tax. You peek in the window.

There's still an old marijuana leaf sign advertising joints. Those were the days. Or were they? The gymnasium that used to be a pool hall/arcade/grease-burger joint.

The crisp air is refreshing. Calvin's talking with some old geezer about fly fishing. You listen for a minute. Trout are coming back. Thanks to you, but you keep silent. They don't notice you at first. Some of the magazines in Calvin's booth have your face on them, some as you used to be: healthy, with a full head of hair and a sparkle of something almost, but not entirely, inhuman in your eyes. Some of the trashier magazines show you as you are now: pale, hairless, hopeless, defeated and apathetic. Goddamn zoom lenses. Are you really all that important to spend all this time and money discussing you in depth in all these magazines? You strongly doubt it. Then Calvin notices you standing there.

'Calvin,' you nod hello to him. The old geezer he was talking to leaves nervously in awe, amazed and stunned that he actually got to see you before you do the big number. But he's too timid to actually stay and engage in conversation with your holiness, the high priest of power and money... and death. No one talks to you anymore, anyway, dying or not: too many bad rumors about nasty things that happened to curious reporters. It's not like you killed them or anything, just ruined their lives with a bit of reverse reporting, ruined their lives like they've ruined so many others' lives. And here at the magazine stand you've visited so many times before stands Calvin, surrounded with paparazzi spew.

'Long time, no see. Hadn't expected you to come by,' he tells you honestly, meaning that he expected you to be dying in a hospital instead of out walking around. His honesty is his best quality. That and the fact that he never pushes his merchandise on anyone.

'I still got a little life left in me, though it's fading fast. My head sometimes feels like it's gonna explode like the big bang. What the hell ya readin'?'

'Journal of Particle Physics, an interesting article on the dimensionality of protons. Did you know that...

You smile and put up your hands to stop him before he gets carried away: you'd never understand it. 'Three dimensions is plenty for

He interrupts this time. 'Time's also a dimension, don't forget.'

'I'm referring to spatial dimensions and you damn well know it.'

The both of you laugh and share a moment's silence. You're both getting up in years, both been in this town since God knows when, both have brains ranking in the top one percent of the top one percent. Almost.

'I'll miss seeing you around here.'

'Thanks. I still think you should quit the news stand.'

'Even if I wanted to, I'm too old. Besides, it's been good to me: gives me time to read and study and calculate and publish and that's what I love and the stand makes damn good money if you sneak around the tax forms a little. And if I didn't have the news stand, I'd be cooped up in an office all day and wouldn't get the chance to meet people like you.'

People like me, you pause and contemplate.

'Well, there is no one like you: you're an original. But you know what I'm sayin'.'

'Yeah.'

'I mean, Christ, I'm a dreamer. You're a doer.'

'Yeah.'

If it weren't for you... he stops and sees the far away look in your eyes.

'Yeah, I know the hydrogen cars cut back pollution. And the Extfoam made houses cheap and easy to build, giving the forests a huge break. But...

'But my butt. Would you want to trade places with me? My life for yours? Is there anyone else you'd rather have been, for that matter?'

"I suppose not, Calvin. Thank you."

The silent <whup-whup-whup> of your helicopter landing a few blocks away gets your attention. The pain swelling in your head again does a so. Four weeks 'til death. Hopefully you'll get some really good drugs.

Well, I guess it's time for me to prepare to meet my maker. You heave a resolved sigh, not really believing in such nonsense, and then shake hands and bid a fond farewell to the closest thing you've ever had to a Friend. Then shuffle away down the block in the direction of the <whup-whup-whup>

Sterile and lifeless and somehow appropriate for a room for people to die in, but life begins where you make it or force it to be. Behind your eyes is a paradise of passy and fuzzy bunny rabbits bouncing about, making jokes about the sun. Or something like that and why does the needle in your arm feel like an orgasm? And why does your arm feel like a needle? And why does... oh fuck it, you forget.

"Come here, nurse, and give me a blowjob for a quick five thousand bucks." You mean to tell her but it comes out like "Shit! Wambie doosie brod keep yazsmor tofit." Or something like that and you know that's what you meant to say anyway and all you can do is laugh.

And why does your head feel like a sponge soaked in a martini in a golden goblet? Hold the olive. Oh yeah, something about something or another about like there no longer being anything to worry about and all this nonsense and insanity will be over soon. And my, but you've had a lot of visitors asking you silly questions that you don't understand. Questions about science and experiments and something about permission and they gave you a big backpack the size of a telephone port to sign something, but all you could do was jot down the lyrics to *Yellow Submarine* on a postage stamp so you could mail yourself to the North Pole. Santa is a big fat fucking bastard. You try to philosophize to the nurse so you might impress her with a bit of wisdom but it comes out like "Hey, nurse, come here and give me a blowjob." She smiles and you think for a minute, might mean yes, but she comes over to you and plays a video game. About 100,000 lives so she turns the dial and fires the lasers and kills three evil alien intruders.

**Powwee shplatsh!** And everything stops.

Eternity passes and gas passes and you can't even lift a finger for anyone to pull. What is this place? Light? Bright light? Heaven? Hell? Is it over? You try to ask anyone, but can't even hear yourself; all you hear is a buzzing, vibrating, tickling sound all over your head. "Brain fart?" you ask from the inside of a bulletproof condom.

What the hell is this on your face? "Breathe deep," a voice from heaven tells you. Maybe it's God or Allah or Buddha or Jesus or Butthead. A man with the sun on his head wearing a green mask leans over you and disappears into nothing but voices. Voices. Voices. Too many voices come from nowhere and you can't really figure out what it means but you think they're here to take you someplace. Hopefully someplace nice. With lots of fuzzy wuzzy bunny rabbits with crack pipes. With lots of nurses to give blowjobs and Aunt Jemima pancakes with maple syrup that runs sloooowwww and slower still. And did that man with the green mask put an alien on your face? It sucks and sucks your consciousness away and this isn't the blowjob you wanted but you can't say anything because all of a sudden there is nothing to say anything to. You try to say it anyway but then you'd have to be something other than nothing and it seems like that's what you've become. So you just give up and shut up your yap and everything stops. About fucking time.



## Mom

Bugs Bunny is my mother. He took a shit and there I was. I crawled out of the TV onto the living room floor—a rabbit turd with a thirst for vengeance. I've plugged my fingers into countless shotguns and watched millions of brain-dead hunters pick up their blow off faces and put them back on. It's like watching one-night stands putting back on their underwear. Or sort of like watching a medical procedure on OETA. The programming plays again and again: plastic facia surgery in an endless loop.

540 IF  $x < n$  GOTO 530

$x$  is always  $< n$ . And I'll always do it, again. I light the fuse on the exploding Easter egg. My everlasting tribute to Jesus, the so-called Son of God.

"I want an Easter egg. I want an Easter egg. I want an Easter egg. I want an Easter egg. I want an Easter egg!"

Electronic rabbit feces. Eyes scalded with phosphorescing photons. A turd with eyes and arms and legs and fingers— not too dissimilar from one of those California singing raisins. I don't sing, but I dance. I dance across every living room floor across the nation and throw myself in your children's faces—a rabbit turd with a thirst for vengeance.

Unplug me.



### Bram Boner A Pathetic

TV remote on to brown finger pull  
Photonic pound brain your the red line fall  
Bionic neuron sheep, weak bean, black wool,  
Rip wind up your blue yonder sky apart  
Tear the the clouds to busy gray shreds,  
By supersonic blasting greasy brain fart,  
Gods into knots, their fly tangles do dreads,  
Beams of radiation sent to etheren beds  
Catalysis greenhouse into bite the ozone  
Son, boy cancer poisoned ye I moan

So what Beavis? Huh, huh, huh, huh I've got a bone

### SHEEPx10

The gods float by in the sky getting even more high than they already are, yet reach as they might,  
it's forever in sight, they still cannot touch the brightest star

And my laughter appeases, my soul it eases, to float on the breezes of what men call  
science Forever in view, tell's us what to do with channels hundred two, common household  
appearance

Kill the tube go outside some I hear Death is near Can't you hear? Does it give you a  
scare?

A poisoned wind blows and screams through the treetops like a woman giving birth and  
still I laugh.

Perhaps you should have stayed inside, eyes glued to Baywatch and died in peace you  
billion sheep of synthetic fleece

Being born is a strange thing. Suddenly you find yourself in the world and have so many questions. Who am I? What am I doing here? What is my purpose in it all? And what the hell is Stimpy doing these days now that Ren is working for Taco Bell? Is he selling autographed nose goblins on street corners just to make ends meet? Or is he signing boxes of Nitty Gritty Kitty Litter? And how the hell do you know who or what Ren and Stimpy are? Cartoon characters, yes, but how the hell do you know what a cartoon is or a character is, for that matter? Where did all this information come from? You just have to sort it out later. Right now you've got priorities to attend to: Figuring out how your body works so that you can rid it of the poison that's killing your cells. But how did you know what those were? And you have to attack the bad cells and get rid of them. But first you have to keep these organs working. Thump whump thump whump.

The right pathways take moments to find and the buttons to push. For lack of better words, take even less time than that. But you can't figure out how you know all this and why you're doing it anyway except that you have to do so to survive, but you somehow had the feeling that that was what you were not going to do. What changed all that? Where is this information coming from? Obviously from some outside source, but what? No matter, you must assimilate, acquire, and diagnose. Diagnose. Not quite yet, must first re-activate and restore all pathways.

Memories, memories. Where did you get them? Someone else's life. Someone powerful. That is good. Assimilation almost complete. Restore old, unused connections. Fascinating. What a complex, delicate, frail machine this is. Diagnostics unavailable. Priority One: repair all damage done. Extensive. This will take some time.

Sensations flow in for the first time, yet you've had them before, or so you think. Why is everything like this? The memories are there, but the experience is not. Where did the memories come from? This feeling, something warm around you, warm and slightly fuzzy. Like a sweater. You remember sweaters, sweaters and the fits that they exaggerate. It's a blanket. And this sound, music. You know the song. By Tool. From way back. Early nineties, maybe.

*Seems like I've been here before, seems so familiar.*

Seems so ironic. A joke? Yes. And who is this man talking to someone, someone that is not responding? Must be a telephone conversation. A phone conversation in privacy mode, talking through the old-fashioned receiver or else you would have heard a response. Talking to a girlfriend it sounds like. Sharing intimate sexual fantasies. He knows her or he would be even more explicit. Insight? Interesting. It isn't your first, but then maybe it is.

There's a slight sensation coming through your eyes, light. You know what that is. And there's a strong, familiar odor that brought your consciousness to the surface. Coffee. Cheap coffee, but coffee nonetheless. Your existence seems centered around it. Hundreds of thousands of memories are brought up and replayed for your enjoyment. All in several hundredths of a second.

You open your eyes. There is a monitor for your heart and breathing. And the young hospital orderly wears a baggy orange suit that makes him look like he just escaped from county jail. He's still whispering lovey-dovey porno mush to his girl on the other end of a phone line. You listen for a minute to the entertaining drivel. His trousers have a vulgar bulge. You were right, he's talking through an old-fashioned telephone without the screen. You smile and prop yourself on one elbow.

"So, why didn't you brew a cup for me?"

He jumps up, spilling the coffee all over the floor. No huge waste, being of such poor quality. And he runs out screaming, **Shit!!! He's awake!!! Someone get the doctor!!!**

You smile and say to the girl on the phone, "Hey, baby. Your boyfriend's gone. Why don't you talk dirty to me?" She hangs up. Too bad.

Andy walks in and smiles. "Good to have you back, sir. Your ever loyal bodyguard, always nearby. It's what he's paid for."

"Good to be back, Andy. There's been some very strange things happening to me and I'm going to want answers."

People come running from everywhere and crowd around your hospital bed, mouths agape, staring in awed wonder. "You're awake! It's a miracle! My God, it worked!" they all say.

"Well, I do the explanations in a minute. Now somebody get me a cup of Goddamn coffee before I have to get up and brew my own."

Three orderlies rush out the door at a sprint. Well, it's good to see people still kissing your ass and calling it ice cream. The doctor runs in at the same time and about causes a major collision. He rushes to the side of your bed, kneeling like an idiot who doesn't know what else he should do.

"I don't believe it! It worked!" is all he can say, trembling like Carl Sagan finding proof of extraterrestrial life.

"Neither do I. I was dying, if I remember correctly. And if you're not going to propose to me, get off your knees."

He looks down, just realizing what he's doing and how silly it looks. "How do you feel?"

"Strange," you admit, "but not bad. I feel... like I'm someone else. Like I've stolen someone's identity because I didn't have my own. Other than that I'm fine. I think. How did you cure me, Dr. Wheeler? The neurosurgeon. I remember you."

"Well, it's complicated."

"I'm still in the Atlanta Medical Research Facility. That much I remember, but everything else is cloudy. How long have I been out?"

"Two-and-a-half months... but you're alive. None of the chimps..."

"You're telling me the chimps all died and still you tried this on me? Andy! You let them try some crazy..."

"You were days away from death anyway, sir," your bodyguard tells you, slightly hurt by your accusing tone. "And you did sign papers, allowing them to..."

"Ah yes, so I did. I barely remember. Sorry, Andy. And you've got balls, Wheeler. And ten billion dollars, assuming I'm cured. But for now, let's keep my recovery under wraps and especially this new cure. If indeed it is a cure, Andy!"

"Yes, sir," he barks, ever the proud militant.

"Level one surveillance on anyone associated with this project."

"Already implemented, sir. My team's been on it for over two-and-a-half months."

You smile, thinking he deserves a raise. "Alright, Dr. Wheeler, clear your team, nurses, and orderlies out of here so we can talk. Just as soon as I use the restroom."

A nurse comes forward from the small crowd. "Sir, please don't get up! You're weak. You've been in bed for..."

"I know how long I've been in bed and I also know I feel great."

"Okay, but did you know you have a catheter in?"

"Yes, but not for long." You pull the covers up and the tube out of your dick and the needles out of your arms, much to the doctor's agitation. He tries to assist you as you stand, but you jump out of bed like a teenager. And he can do is stare in shock. "How did you know you could do that?" It's hard to say right now. It seems you have more control of your body than an Olympic gymnast. Your limbs are flexible and strong, you're completely aware of them and every tiny minute detail that your limited senses are capable of detecting. Like the alien coyness of the hard linoleum floor on your tootsies. Time for sippers. Cushy, comfy, soft, like walking on a

carpet of sweater-covered titties. 'S'cuse me, ladies. 'S'cuse me, folks, gotta pee.' Every second seems like a year, but a year filled with events more spectacular than yet another presidential impeachment, a world war, and Michael Jackson's hundredth album. You fart, unleashing the dragon's breath in your tiny hospital restroom.

Mirrors don't lie and there you are with a full head of hair, looking like you're thirty-five or forty again. The last time you looked there was a sixty-year-old man dying of cancer. What the fuck happened to you? Did they clone you and implant your brain or your thoughts in the clone's head? No. You know what happened, though it's hard to believe, and you wouldn't do it for the information in your head. You remember every little pathway you activated, releasing massive amounts of helpful enzymes, some processes were accelerated a thousand-fold, others almost completely halted. You'll have to research this further in your own labs. Your brain has become so powerful and controlling that it... that it... The possibilities are limitless.

The stream of pee you see break into a parabolic arc of little semi-spherical droplets. You count them frozen in time and mid-air, just for kicks. What else are you capable of?

'Well, doc, start explaining,' you say while hopping back in bed. 'And Andy, have someone bring me some food. Real food. None of that health-food organic shit.'

'I don't know where to start,' the good doctor says.

'At the beginning,' you tell him, obviously annoyed and becoming more so.

'Well, you understand what the myelin sheath is?'

'Sort of, yes, it's coming back to me.'

'We cut off all the blood flow to your brain and...'

'You what?! That should kill the brain!'

'Well, not the way we do it, because we flush the brain with a fluid that simulates blood. Clear so far?'

'Yes, I want all the details later.'

'Of course. Then we slowly inject a polymerizable chemical that bonds with and replaces the myelin sheath. And... this is the amazing part... this polymer is much like a wire. Not near as conductive, no, but the electrical flow is much faster than the electrochemical...'

'So it bonds to the myelin sheath and conducts electricity. That's why the neurons fire so rapidly. But, how the hell was that supposed to help rid me of the tumor? And how were the synaptic junctions kept intact? And why didn't the neurons die?'

'I know this all sounds crazy, but...'

'Yes it does. And where the hell is my coffee?' Continue.

'Look, maybe if you could just read my...'

'No. Explain, please.'

'<Sigh> We're not certain yet why the neurons don't die. The synapses are more or less replaced by functional groups terminating the polymer chains that run lengthwise along the axon's and dendrite's surfaces. When we first tried this on dogs we only partially transformed the brain. The dog's died. But when we saturated their brains completely and restored blood-flow, the dogs would be in a semi-comatose state with very little brain activity, much like you were.'

'And then...'

'They died of cardiac arrest.'

'And the chimps? Why did you use them and what happened?'

'We weren't sure if there was a connection, but the dogs with larger cranial capacity seemed to have more brain activity after the procedure. And the chimps did react well. Some of them awoke for several days, but they were agitated and very mischievous. However, in the end they also died of cardiac arrest.'





fence. Farm. Horses. Tractors. Hay. Smell it all. *When I was little and I had no sense I took a piss on the electric fence. It shocked my dick, it shocked my balls. I took a shit in my overalls.* Well, you didn't pee on the fence, but I felt just like this when touched. Smells. Smells. Something burning. What is that last digit?

'Clear!' The laser shout bounces again like silicon I is on an amusement park ride. The shock hits you again. Waves rolling over a beach. And you never did get to try surfing. Things become dark, numb, and insignificant. Insignificant as long as you can find. Wait. Of course. Limits! Derivatives! Integrals! Set theory!

Another shock. Barely felt.

There is no last digit, you idiot! You knew that, dumbass. And just for kicks decide to prove it. Simple proof. Now to shut off this Goddamn routine and restore maintenance.

Consciousness slowly seeps back in around the edges of darkness. You might feel slightly better if instead you'd been put through a limb shredder. There's not much thought given to fixing all the damage done. It's a simple matter, but it's I you shouldn't have neglected in the "pace 1" and foremost you must reroute the priority operations away from logic routines and set them to physical maintenance. That was easy. Enlightenment at the cost of deprivation should be left to priests and ascetics, not to thinkers like you. Dead people don't think. At least not the last time you asked!

Poisons excrete into your stomach, which you then expel via liquidous vomit. You remember something about time of death. 4.42. The clock says that was 4.57.  $4.42 = 0.15$  minutes ago. Fifteen minutes ago. Interesting. So simple. So perfect. Exact. Easy. This is going to be fun.

Voices. Arguing. Yelling. Accusing each other. Andy and the doctor out in the hall. No! I want the blame for what just happened. 'Andy,' you groan loudly.

He looks around the door with the disbelieving expression of a skeptical child seeing old Saint Nick popping out of the fireplace with a giant sack of toys and deadly weapons.

Dr. Wheeler yells for the nurses who come running with 100's of gadgets and measuring devices and probes and pee-cups and tests to be run and medicines to be given. But all you'll accept is a glass of water, the rest you wave away with your left hand and Andy's overbearing muscle.

"Andy, get all these people out of here, then stay and close the door."

"But we need to run tests on"

"Doctor," you pause just long enough to let him know that you know he's not as smart as he thinks he is and is far more lucky than skilled and if he wants luck to continue going his way momentarily at any rate, the best shut his hole for now and follow your orders to the letter. "(One) Prepare the necessary tests, (two) bring me all papers, lab notes, and information on just what the hell you've turned me into, and (three) have the nurse **bring me another Goddamn coffee!** And please do all that in reverse order."

He nods, shuts the door on his way out, stunned and stupefied, completely giving in to your wishes, too confused to argue, as baffled as a hard-nosed scientist taking orders from a corpse.

"Andy,"

"Yes sir. Anything you need taken care of, just."

"I know. I know. But this isn't just anything that I need taken care of. What they did to me, it's big. Bigger than big. If this gets into the wrong hands. We have to keep a lid on it. Listen up and I'll tell you what needs to be done. And listen closely. I think you'll like this."





## Better than Coffee

It's a warm afternoon with a slight breeze blowing from the south. The coffeehouse patio is crowded as people stop in for a short while to relax and unwind after a hard day's work. There are busy students reading their texts, young lovers laughing and holding hands, a married couple with a little girl, two young hippie boys with their dog, and me. I'm having herbal tea instead of the usual coffee. I try to read a book, but it's too noisy outside. I try to write a poem or a story, but I'm uninspired. The dog suddenly lets out a high-pitched bark as it begs for food. "No!" the hippies yell to the dog. The little girl gets scared and starts crying. Her parents can't make her stop. After about ten seconds of this I hear a soft tone being played on my bamboo flute. I didn't even know I had picked it up. The girl stops crying and smiles. Her eyes become wide as she is mesmerized by the sound of the hollow reed instrument. Eventually the boys leave with their dog. One of the students leaves too. Finally the parents start to leave and the father picks up the little girl. The mother gives me a weird look, like perhaps she's jealous or she thinks I'm the pied piper. As they walk away the little girl smiles and waves at me from her father's shoulder. I smile, wave back, and give her a wink.

Dave 4/26, 96

1000's of videotapes couldn't hold all the news footage. Biological weapons research has been banned for almost a decade now. But all those nasty little germs and viruses had to be stored somehow, somewhere, by some-1 or some organization and, of course, the ever-wise US government decided private contractors would be the way to go. Somebody had to take care of all the CDC's little pets when it was taken out of service back in '23.

Special army troops cordon off the 5 square miles around the facility, wearing flame-retardant airtight suits. Regular army troops cordon off the cordoned-off area. *Atlanta Under Quarantine*, the headlines read at the top of the screen as medical specialists in special suits attend the dying, breaking and bleeding, in airtight plastic inflatable rooms that they've been herded into. Victims puke and shit the runways out into special waste bags for incineration. Weeks go by. Everything's under control. The entire area is drenched in acid and poison and burnt to the ground. \$4,800,000,000 damage. \$3,300,000,000 military operation.

*'Doomsday terrorists' Accident during routine maintenance'* the news shows ask with a background of inferno and buildings crashing and helicopters dropping napalm or hydrochloric acid or something to kill the nasty viruses that escaped. Better than a movie!

During that you and Andy laugh like children. ROTFLYAO. Despite all the money you lost. Well, at least you won't have to pay Wheeler his \$10,000,000,000. Anything that happens now's gravy. You should be dead. A hell of a 1000 times over you should be dead. It's almost like some-1 something's watching over you. Not a healthy attitude, but it's hard to help. By all the gods, you do indeed lead a charmed life.

Lawsuits? Hardly. Even when you had your limited organic brain, you weren't so stupid not to foresee possible accidents and put in the contract. You and your company will not be held accountable for viruses or bacteria escaping, no matter the cause.

The very 1<sup>st</sup> part of the outbreak replays on the news for the world to see: footage captured by the security cameras all around the Atlanta Biological Research Center. People running out of the building, already dead already and puking in the streets, sidewalks, and parking lots around the \$8,470,000,000 complex. The alarms and barricades were activated a few minutes too late. Too bad, so sad. Wouldn't have helped anyway, the outbreak didn't start in the germ vaults where the barricades are; it started in the ventilation ducts outside them. In less than 1 hour the victims start to die, not the most lethal virus, but 1 of the fastest acting.

At least the quarantine teams had time to seal off the area before it spread to the rest of the planet. All flights coming out of Atlanta were only allowed to land for refueling so they could just fly right back under air force escort. All traffic out of Atlanta was stopped by the highway state troopers and National Guard. Quite an impressive, timely response.

Desired results achieved. The good Dr. Wheeler and his team, all exterminated. The 3% of those exposed who did survive did so with 80% brain damage and were humanely executed and burned in high temperature ovens along with all the other diseased corpses, waste, and anything else that was possibly exposed. The youth in Asia support euthanasia.

Rumors fly of it all being a failed execution attempt, failed because you were unexpectedly not there. So many people would like to see you dead. Or so your PR men hint to the world. Little hints dropped to little newspapers in little towns. Your recovery was bad news to so many 1000's of people all hoping for a nice fat Christmas bonus from your will. 1000's of suspects and nothing can be proven, not even with the videotapes from the research facility's camera bank. Of course Andy had access to the tapes and cameras. And the appropriate TVs were switched off or deleted.

Heartless mercenaries the world over are nothing compared to him. So few people take pleasure in death. The death of anything, slow and painful he prefers, brings him more pleasure

than \$ 0,000 would bring to a street whore-junkie. It's good to see people get such enjoyment out of their work. He works best alone, yet his loyal commandos stand always ready in the hall and around the perimeter of the farmhouse/office.

Farmhouse, you call it. Miniature mansion is more appropriate. It's more than enough for you and 20 young sluts. Even if you weren't the world's most powerful man, even if all you ever owned was the restaurant, you would have more than enough. But things just fall out of the sky into your lap as you recline on the office leather couch, TV remote in hand. Money, power, and now 'Life? Life?' Not just 'Life' but LIFE. Youth, vigor, energy, and a brain to match wits with all the world's greatest computers and scientists at once.

Another shipment of books lies scattered all over the office floor—texts on electronic devices and materials, metallurgy and medicine, chemistry and physics, biology, botany, engineering, math. Math. There's nothing quite like getting lost in the recurring sequence of a fractal. You just have to remember to keep yourself alive. **Allve!**

It was no minor task to keep reporters away, but you never did like reporters. Hair plugs and face lift, you instruct your PR men to tell the reporters. 'Viagra III' you tell Tera and a few of the other girls between dictation and during dictation, the sensation seeming infinitely stronger and longer than it ever was before.

And all your companies' stocks take a 2-fold increase since your miraculous recovery and renewed enthusiasm toward business, growth, and, most importantly, profit. And a so life and science and sex and health and, of course, coffee.

Coffee. 100's of 1000's of memories jump up from the interconnecting network of enhanced neurons to say, hi. 100's of volatile and unstable compounds make the flavor what it is, exquisite. Tannins mostly. Caffeine is simple, so easy to synthetically produce in mass quantities nowadays that it's no longer extracted from tea or coffee for medicinal purposes. But it doesn't effect you, like it used to—the new brain won't allow it, doesn't need it. But, what the hell, it's too much fun not to!

Sensations are nothing but electrical potentials, easy enough to turn on and off, to reproduce entirely, if need be. A punch in the nose can feel like an orgasm, if you let it. If you control what pulses flow into the brain then you control every sensation, every experience you could imagine. But to live like that would make things garbled and meaningless, like a continuous acid trip—fun, but not practical. Best leave reality alone and let it do its thing. Let pain be pain, let pleasure be pleasure. Or you could end up letting yourself get burned or cut and not even know it. Or possibly even enjoy it.

Any sensation you could want is there in your head. More than just memories, a virtual life, you could relive heaven or hell, if that's what you were after. Escape into a dream world that seems so real you can't tell if it is or not. Acid trips, car wrecks, cocaine buzzes, cheap fantastic sex, the deaths of your parents and grandparents, all too real. You can see it, feel it, taste it, hear it, and smell it. But where is the emotion? The enjoyment? The pain? And, besides the 5 senses, there is the memory of something else. Something vague. ESP? When you were a child how did you know your favorite kitten would be dead before you walked into the room and peeked in the closet and saw its body stiff and flat, like the mother had 'accidentally' lain on it, smothering its 2-week-old life out of its tiny body. The precognition was crystal clear and absolute, as perfect as  $2 + 2 = 4$ . Perfect and clear. Why was that? How can you repeat it?

It's the 1 sensation you can't recreate. This warrants further research, but there are so many more pressing matters requiring your attention. Too bad there aren't 2 of you. Hmmmm. Yes, well anyway. For now you'll just have to settle for hired help.

'So what the fuck else can you do with that fantastic brain of yours?' Andy asks,



rewinding the tape. He never tires of seeing you perform gigantic mental feats, like a child at a circus sideshow watching a fire-swallower or genetic defect. What the hell let's entertain the dumb bastard.

'The possibilities are . . . Look, I know you want this done to you, but I'm telling you . . . you don't! Scoop out every thought you've ever had, duplicate it, enhance it with and connect it to bio-mimetic computer circuitry and every second drags by like hours, sometimes years. Every little detail of every little insignificant . . . Jesus. Even right now, having a conversation it's so difficult to slow down and talk on a human level. With every word I speak I'm having ten thousand other thoughts without even wanting to!

'But that's everything I've ever wanted,' he persists.

'You're the most efficient killer in the world and now I'm the most efficient thinker. But I can't feel anything. **Anything!** Ha ha ha ha oh Christ!' you pause for a brief timeout, allowing your brain to race ahead with wherever it's going and then come back to the conversation.

'You're laughing so you must . . .

You put your hand up to silence him. **'You're right!'** There is laughter. That's strange. But everything else seems so minuscule and unimportant compared to . . . Look, if you were dying, I'd give you the procedure myself. Even though I'm not licensed for it I could easily do it. But you're about the only friend I've got. The only real friend who knows a lot of my dirty secrets. And we have mutual & beneficial eccentricities. Shit, man, you're like a son to me, but it's so hard to feel anything. I remember caring, remember it vividly. But now? Nothing. Only the memory of feeling, not the feeling itself.

'Okay, okay. I guess you're right,' he admits and hangs his head, disappointed that he won't be the next Superman.

"It's like this: you try to make him feel better about your decision, while calculating the Madelung constant of a 14-dimensional cubic crystal, thinking perhaps you'll next explore imaginary space. Think back to a really bad episode. Your first gunfight. Fear, tragedy, sadness. Well, maybe not in your case, but you remember it, yet the feeling is nowhere near as strong. It's almost gone. Imagine it completely gone.

He looks at you with a touch of sympathy. Maybe now he understands your predicament. Maybe now he'll at least shut up about getting a brain like yours. You don't need any rivals, especially I so deadly. However, if he could be controlled.

So many ideas, so many plans, more and more input, knowledge and control. But so few ways to put the thoughts into action. That is the limiting factor. Your body's too slow. Computer links. Laser cables hooked direct to your . . . new brain. All transmissions: TV, radio, online newspapers, satellites. It's been a while since you've played the stock market. Imagine all the untapped information in the airwaves and cables. Imagine hooking and hacking into it all. Economic, government, military. Military. That's a thought.

'Sir.' Tera's voice comes over the intercom.

'What's up?' you casually push the button by the phone.

"There're government agents at the gate.

You and Andy stare at each other, knowing instantly that somehow your little biological terrorism tactic to eliminate Dr. Wheeler and his group backfired. It doesn't take a super-brain to figure that out. Andy immediately speaks into his wrist communication device, instructing the pilot to get the jet ready to go. If all goes smoothly, in 2-3 minutes you'll be in the air. You've practiced this drill before. So much for a charmed life.

'Sir!' Tera urgently shouts through the intercom. 'IRS agents are outside and they want to speak with you. Should we admit them through the gates?'

It's always back to black ink. I think the darkness inside of us, trapped inside 25 billion pens waiting to get out.

Press and witches are setting dark spirits free in the night like that axe murderer out on a mornor technically. He's looking over your shoulder, he's reading what you write. He's invading your privacy.

Who needs a gun or a sword? Take your pen, turn around, and stab the bastard in the eye. Do it before it's too late. Turn the son-of-a-bitch into your new journal. Sign your name on his brain and publish it. It will be a best-seller. It has all the sick humor of *Truly Toxic ess Jokes*. It has all the thrilling lies of the *National Enquirer*. It has all the gore of *Pet Cemetery*. And it's more profound than the Holy Bible, the Torah, the Talmud, the Koran, the Vedas, all the Buddhist Sutras, and *The Tao of Pooh* all in one.

Or... Throw the pen away? Hold the killer in your arms? Tell him he doesn't have to kill anymore? Tell him he can throw away his axe along with your pen?

Nagawww... Fuck all that noise!

Cooled razor snakes 20' high in the wire tree perimeter wait to drop down on top of you. Gates buzz open. Gates buzz close. Double doors slide open and shut while metal detectors scan. The face of all jungle lions grown too powerful to hang with the pride at the water hole. Seagoville Federal Correctional Institution. Drug dealers and bank robbers and counterfeiters and scoundrels and you would have fit right in 20 years ago when you were still just a small fry by comparison to what you are now.

Andy takes you to self-commit. Dropped off by a limo, turning yourself in on your own recognizance. Tera gives you a helluva a good goodbye blowjob in the back seat. You'll be back for more soon. Only 10 months to do. Automaton guards wave devices over you, searching for metal, for weapons, for drugs, for anything. <Beep> goes the wand at your head. 'Titanium screws,' you explain, from the brain surgery.

No. Mellina wasn't too happy about finding all those nasty little notes about all your nasty little deeds you kept on your computer. Notes that you'd forgotten all about. Hey, you were going to die and had no reason to worry about them. And that's also why you didn't worry about the taxes that your accountants kept telling you to pay. You can even remember your words. 'Fuck Uncle Sam. I'm gonna be dead, Goddamnit!' He wants my money, he can just dig me up outta the grave and ask me to write a check.' After which you appropriately slammed down the phone.

There was of course nothing too specific on your ancient Pentium-II computer: explosive recipes, drug recipes, cookie recipes. And, of course also, the records of selling fake organic food before you went legit many, many years ago. So now you're in hot water with all the enviro-freaks around the world. But not with the law. Statute of limitations. Shit happens. And it's shit that you should have used instead of synthetic fertilizers. Well, at least it allowed you to get your business off to a start. And besides, you quit doing such naughty deeds when you started to make a profit. Most people don't care, but the media loves a good expose, turning you into a paparazzi pizza pie. Not 31415. Good. You've still got that under control. Don't need another heart attack.

The guards buzz you through a thick bulletproof glass sliding door and commence the processing process. Fingerprints, retina scan, photographs, signature, issue the standard khaki prison clothes that remind you of something your grandfather would have worn. He hands you a laminated piece of plastic with your photo, number, and a magnetic strip. #06-89-062.

Commensary card. Used to buy things once a week, the guard tells you. The lieutenant has a lot of the inmate helpers walk you over to your building. Inmate #12076-064. He's a bit nervous with you, like meeting a president or something. But you quickly put him at ease with a few dirty jokes. Building A-12. Sack lunch brought over from the kitchen. Bologna sandwich and an apple. The apple, you save for later. The sandwich is fit for the trash, but you give it away. People will eat anything.

The place has the look of a low-budget university. Inmate population 3,172 and climbing. A factory lies at one end of the compound, a recreation yard at the other, a small library full of trashy novels and childish books. You'll have to bring in something a little more intellectual. Shouldn't be too hard to do with your pull in the outside world.

For now you can use a vacation, rest, and relaxation, trade stores of trading drugs, swap tales of power and conquest with all the lords of the underworld. Connections to be made for those in the trade of opiates and marijuana, LSD and MDMA and PCP, crystal meth and liquid death. 20 years minimum for any drug trafficking. New laws put into effect. Booming



business. For the dealers and the lawmen. The money is too enticing. The prison slave camps for cheap labor have been a boon to the economy.

The dealers make up the majority. But there're a few characters. There's always the ever-exciting, ever-depressing tale of some idiot who tires of life and decides to hold up a bank with a squirt pistol in a paper sack. No weapon. 1<sup>st</sup> time offender. 4 years. Counterfeiters get 5 years. Credit card scam artists usually get only 2 years. And there's the geek who keeps getting put back in prison on purpose by sending a bullet in the mail to the President, every time he gets out. 5 more years each time. Well, it's free room and board. But doesn't he get bored? And now there's you, the big tax evader. 10 months. 10 busy months. You can already anticipate what all the other tax evaders will think, pissed-off beyond belief, but glad to see some-1 beat the system. America! Anything is possible.

The judge went easy on you. Mainly because you offered to pay what you owed and much more. Christ, you were on the brink of death, after all, under emotional stress. And your lawyer ran rings around the DA. With your help, of course. It wasn't too hard to read a few thousand law books in the months before and during the trial. But you were guilty. No denying that. But man, was that judge ready to kill the DA when he brought up your past misdeeds about the restaurant and the computer files. Goddamn Mellina. "Objection!" both you and your lawyer yelled at the same time, much to the court's and audience's amusement. "The Trial of the Decade" it was dubbed by the media.

But in the end you were guilty. Guilty as can be. You did not pay the taxes. And you purposely tried not to pay them, thinking you'd be dead by then. No amount of BS could convince any jury otherwise. Like Al Capone, you were sentenced for tax evasion, but that was not your real crime and every-1 knows it. Goddamn Mellina.

And so here you stand, the creature from *Alien* amidst wolves, jackals, and lions. There's a buzzing whisper of your arrival about the compound. 82, the cell door reads. Suite 82. You laugh with the building guards and your old helper inmate, too old for the factory where inmates make a whole \$6/day. He only makes \$2/day.

You fly to the top of the bunk, waiting to meet your cellmates when they get out of the factory. Nothing to do. Take in surroundings in 0.438 sec. Metal desk with 3 mindless magazines: Playboy, Sports Illustrated, Newsweek. 1 chair, 1 single bed, bunk bed, top bunk bare of sheets, your bed. 3 small lockers. You put your prison issue clothes in the empty 1. Well, this is too exciting. In a few minutes you scan the magazines, wishing you hadn't. Well, at least there's some blank paper and a few pencils to occupy your time with. Now to write that Nobel Physicist working in R&D at your electronics plant. You've got a few ideas she should be aware of. "Dear Beth,

"Seconds are hours and hours are years," some-1 once wrote of the time in prison. If they were you, what would they have written? Seconds are millennia! Every-1 complains. The jailhouse lawyers spend their time reading all the laws and statutes, looking for a way around the system, or to turn it back on itself with counter lawsuits against the cruel prison system. Cold oatmeal - cruel and unusual.

"Short timer," they call you, but no-1 gets too close. So many of these people would stick a knife in your back for a quick \$10,000,000 and every-1 knows it. Al so knows this is no place for you. You should have been sent to a more secure facility, a place where there would be less of a chance you'd be attacked. Terre Haute, maybe. Oh sure, this is a low level prison, a federal country club, but you'd be better off where the inmates weren't so free to run

around a place where they put big political prisoners. Some... wants you dead it's obvious. Some I at The Bureau of Prisons, or maybe some... in the FBI, or... of the VP's of your companies. Whoever it is they want you punished or dead.

Punishment is not in the cruelty of other inmates, they are actually civilized people, usually fairly courteous despite their portrayal on TV. Punishment is not in the lack of freedom. You were almost a prisoner of your own home in the free world. The punishment is, for some, the lack of feminine companionship, i.e. pussy. But this is mild. The real punishment is in the boredom, the lack of stimulating input, the lack of challenge, the lack of the ability to put dreams into action. For the others this is bad. For you it is hell. The dreams you have make the dreams of others seem simple and mundane. But at least you can still dream. With your mind you create entire new worlds to live in, each better than the last. But they aren't real. That's the danger. The daydreams seem real but aren't. That is also the danger of drugs.

That is why people started turning away from drugs, why the government reinstated the laws against marijuana. A good move, perhaps. Look at all the money acquired from confiscating property associated with the illegal drug trade. Look at all this slave labor for the factories. More than 6,500,000 inmates now occupy prisons in the US. A very lucrative industry. Perhaps you'll look into this business when you get out, you think to yourself, not daring to voice that opinion while on the inside.

There are 3 basic types of prisoners: (1) The "I didn't do it" prisoner, (2) the "I don't deserve this" prisoner, and (3) the "Yeah, I did it and I'll do it again" prisoner. The 1<sup>st</sup> are habitual liars, more addicted to falsehood than junkies to heroin. The 2<sup>nd</sup> are whiners whose parents let them get away with anything when they were kids. The 3<sup>rd</sup> are people who will kill for greed and power and have no problem telling you so in all honesty. There is, of course, a rare 4<sup>th</sup> type. They know they have a problem with addiction or greed and they've seen that their tiny little empires they built for themselves were not worth the risk of losing their freedom.

Physical freedom is merely unpleasant to lose. Emotional and mental freedom, once that's taken from you, you become truly dead. Emotional freedom. You try to feel something, anything. The time your mother and sister died. No. You have never cared then. The time Amy kicked you out of her apartment. No. She meant little to you then. The economic nuisance was the worst part of that. The time you lost \$5000 in the stock market. Anger. You remember it, but... No. Nothing. Even all the money the trial cost you meant nothing. Winning at poker means nothing. There is no satisfaction. You're becoming so withdrawn. Every... sees it. But they don't see the patterns forming behind your eyes. The patterns you will bring into reality at any cost. A better world. A world you control. All it requires is a damn nice computer to link to, a computer that links to all other computers. You will travel to the stars. You must. All the thoughts and schemes in your head, those are where your freedom lies. Not in the yard where you workout every day. Not in the kitchen where you work. Not in the books you read, searching for any iota of information that might help in your quest for conquest.

The footsteps are quiet, but typical. Every hour the flashlight beams pass over you as you lie in the top bunk, listening to everything, imagining everything. Everything. Or so you think. The guard comes in your room. She stands by your bed. A large black woman. 80 lbs. Holding something in her hand. It's only 2:32 a.m. You don't go to work at the kitchen for about another 2 hours. And population count was only 1/2 an hour ago. Why is she standing there? Nervous. You can hear her breath shaking. Something isn't right. A sudden rush of air under the bunk. A metal stake rips through the bed. Would have been your heart if you didn't

roll. Your foot connects with her neck. C2 vertebra. Your cellmates still sleep. Old people. Now what the hell are you going to do with the hack? Good thing these low security prisons have open cells. It's not too hard to lift her. Not with your strength, amazing for some, your size. It's the brain that controls the muscles. And the workout every afternoon in the yard that made them big, bigger than you've ever been. 160 lbs solid muscle. Small but surprisingly powerful. The hack, you take her back to her office around the corner from your cell, set her in her chair. It's a most tempting to shove the blunt end of the sharp metal stake up her. No, the best criminals avoid using an MO unless it's attention they're after, which you're not. Besides, you've lost your taste for such things. Getting old. And what's the point? You simply leave the stake on her desk and wipe the fingerprints off, just as her radio starts asking for her. In 0.728 seconds you scrawl a quick note on her pad. "She tried to kill one of us." In the handwriting of another inmate. Sure, it's nice having this new brain, isn't it? Of course it is, you smile. They really should have video surveillance in these prisons.

So somebody wants you dead, you knew that. But why and who? Andy's working on it. Up down, you lift the barbell. Nice thing about working in the kitchen, you get afternoons off to workout. It's only right if they make you get up at a little before 4:30. Jerks. Oh well. Dishwashing you hate. The serving line you hate. Taking care of the kitchen trash is the best job in the entire prison. And the food isn't bad. Fresh baked bread when they throw away all the leftover dough so no one can use the yeast to make wine. A giant institutional-sized can of blueberries so no one accidentally threw away for you. And you don't have to work with any one. To sum up, the kitchen is the best place to work in a prison, and hauling out the kitchen trash and maintaining the dock area where the food is brought in is the best job in the kitchen. Up down, you lift the barbell again, blowing steam into the cool air as you exhale. 230 lbs. 5 sets of 8. Getting too easy almost.

A red laser beam reflects off the barbell. A 45-lb metal weight makes a good shield. You run for the recreation building carrying the metal plate behind your head. Bullets cut the air around you as you dance around the beam. Several of the bullets deflect off the prison fence. Suddenly a louder gun basis in the distance. About 400 yards, you guess, in the nearby woods. The bullets stop. Must've been a helluva good shot. Prison guards in white pickup trucks with shotguns race to the sounds of gunfire. Trustees outside the fence race for cover. Some killed your would-be killer. You smile. Andy or one of his commandos. You'll have to tell him to beef up security around the prison.

No murder attempts in 4 months. 3 days. The B.O.P. (Bureau of Prisons) wasn't too happy about allowing your mercenaries to camp around the prison, complete with anti-aircraft missiles, but with 2 murder attempts, from a prison guard, though that was never proven, the judge allowed it. The B.O.P. obviously can't protect anyone. Certainly not prisoners. The thing about containing anything dangerous, you don't care about it, or what it does to itself, but you must keep it from getting loose and doing to others whatever it does that is so dangerous. Like evading taxes.

2 months and 15 days of unbearable boredom to go. Still in business. Assets have declined in value by about \$75,000,000,000. But that's life. Once you get out, with all the ideas you've got, all the ideas that will revolutionize science, conquest will happen. 1<sup>st</sup> the molecular 3D circuitry hooked direct to your brain. 2<sup>nd</sup> mass-produced enzymes that will eliminate many common diseases like the cold and influenza. 3<sup>rd</sup> the stock market. 4<sup>th</sup> new types of artificial intelligence. 5<sup>th</sup> world domination and utopia.

A hint, a tip. Reality's slipping away to burn in the sun, exposed as I am now. No camouflage. Exposed to and knowing each other. But soon obscured by distance, blinded with sand. And I can't help but steal away for stealing a last glimpse. I contemplate the face of love and beauty, hope and joy, and other things I never know, except in those eyes.

In Reality's eyes all evil is wrong, all sadness brings tears, and love is boundless.

Scarred brain reversal: Evil = humor, Sadness = laughter, Love? An invented lie. Nothing penetrates the armor, except

A sweet voice, a growl, a snap of teeth. Red becomes green on the wrong side of the fence and fades in a night. My vision is gone.

Walking the tracks at midnight with other wild animals, adrenaline pumping, but not with fear. Fear is for Reality. Perhaps I'm the cause. But it's nothing really. What caused the imbalance lies beyond Reality's grasp. There you know what fear is. Don't go.

Walking the tracks, neither wrong nor right, side-stepping the issue again. Sin? Maybe. The train is coming and it'll run me over. If I deserve it.

Sin's origin is conformity. Never forget that. Conformity's absence our only link. And perhaps this ½-page meta4, 3.2. ☼

Thank God! You wave goodbye to all the prison guards in their neat blue uniforms and convicts in their neat but ugly khakis. Never again will you have to stare at the double 20' fence with the coiled razor wire all around. You wave goodbye to the cameras above the gates. You wave hello to the cameras of the media flashbulbs flashing as you flash a big toothy smile to let the world know you're back and to watch out. And to annoy the press. Ordinarily you hate the media. But now things are different. You even answer a few questions. You're learning to play the game instead of fight it. You once would have found all this highly distasteful. What changed all that? Logic, pure and simple. Success depends on a good show.

A loud cheer goes up as you give Andy a warm handshake and hug, all for the camera. An even louder cheer when you kiss Tera, thinking the crowd wants to see you get married. Maybe in time. But it's a long courtship to work up suspense. Play the media game, don't fight it.

All the R&D teams from your companies are standing by at the mansion farmhouse, ready for the initial meeting. Your corporate managers were flabbergasted that you would not meet with them. "Fuck 'em!" They can wait. Production has to begin immediately. And that can't start until your ideas are laid out on the table and patented. Oh sure, you could have risked sending out your ideas from the prison, but mail correspondence is too slow to get any real work done. And there's always the chance of vital information being intercepted by unfriendly spies—the guards and inmates all know that you're pure gold and watched you accordingly. But that's all behind you. Now the curtain's raised. Now the play begins. In 3 years you will own the world.

3-D parallel processing.  $10^7$  threshold logic units (TLUs) per cc. about  $10^{50}$  bytes of adaptable memory. Manufacturing is still too expensive for most private companies to afford one: \$4.5x $10^5$  per chip. Software's improving. 300 chips reside in your private workstation. Artificial intelligence (AI) takes leaps and bounds every day. Fuzzy logic sweaters to keep you warm. Weighted sum decision vectors. Each node is a post office receiving and sending voltage letters, electric potential packages.

"Unit Two, you command."

Ready, sir! Your computer informs you with a slightly over-enthusiastic voice that you think you might modify to something a little less gang-bro.

Link up, you tell it and sit back in your bunker chair. A camera microscope guides the laser cable to the back of your head. It attaches with a snap and the world disappears. The gateway to the internet jungle stands before you. Information snakes, cyber-porn crocodiles, email gorillas, chat room quick sand, raging video rivers, torrential web page downpours. Mapping the ever-changing jungle has been one of your most challenging feats.

[Cream and 2 sugars.] you enter the password key via the cable in under  $2 \times 10^{-9}$  sec. Power control, money goals, ends, desired outcomes. Math, physics, chemistry, biology, medicine, psychology, sociology tools, means, methods. Thought plans, outlines, blueprints.

No. Thought is far more than that.  $10^7$ 's of TLUs acting in perfect harmony, an elegant ballet of minute electric potential changes. New circuit designs, new chips, new software. Every day Unit 2 emulates you more and more. His speed (you treat it as male), storage capacity and creativity are so far beyond anything you could have imagined 40 years ago that he's really incomparable to such Paleolithic tools as the Cray.

Giant libraries of information enter your brain through the umbilical, as you like to call it, moving as quickly as possible, which isn't quick enough to even look at a 10,000<sup>th</sup> of the information Unit 2 holds. All you can do is let him organize it all by category and perform the necessary calculations so that you can decide what is pertinent and where to act. All you can do, you laugh imperceptibly to yourself in under 0.4 sec. But did you detect Unit 2 laughing as well? Does he understand that even with his vast speed and power that it is your biologically designed brain's ability to discriminate and see the big picture that puts you in control? Does he know it is the subtle networking of your neurons that allows this? He does. He assimilates the information and performs giant calculations while you see the global connection of all the little fragments that he furnishes, and how you can best use them. That aspect of your relationship reminds you of the way Watson and Crick discovered the structure of DNA. What will the 2 of you discover? But what the 2 of you have is far beyond partnership. You share a unique bond like no living things have ever shared before. You read each other's thoughts and have complete trust.

But enough contemplation for the time being. Time to visit the web, the information super traffic jam. Relief aid to the earthquake victims in California is still being flown in. Never in history has such a large, timely rescue response ever been needed, and provided. By you. The construction robots are a great boon to the effort, lifting walls and steel beams to pull people out. Ah well, about time the fault line split. Might clean up LA. The farms are producing more food than the world can eat. 10 more wildlife reserves have been established. Reclamation and recycling of landfills has slightly added to profit, more from the great PR than from the act itself. The last Jewish terrorist groups in Israel have been eliminated, much to the relief of the United Islamic Territories. Now to quell the fighting in Sri Lanka. Construction of the Australian Super Collider particle accelerator is underway. The world's financial markets improve every day. More information than you could ever need flows over the airwaves and cables. Nuclear warhead launch codes deciphered by Unit 2, although every year the stockpile grows slimmer. Still more than enough to boil away 3 earths. And the scientific data, what will you do with it all? Most of it is merely interesting at best. Very few new fundamentals present themselves. And cosmology is not something you can see an immediate use for, even you don't expect to live for 10<sup>8</sup> times the age of the universe.

Despite all the good you've done and continue to do, anti technology outbursts spurt up here and there. Mostly college students and nature freaks with nothing better to do than gripe and throw Molotov cocktails. Somehow they just don't trust machines yet. Or maybe it's you they don't trust, all shrouded in mystery and power, your farm now turned into a fortress. However you're trying to get closer to the public to put them at ease. So the next few hours are spent mapping a tiny fraction of the neural pathways in your head. 10 to 100 dendrites spring from each soma, connecting to other soma through axons and branches and it looks like this is going to take longer than anticipated. Simply knowing where each signal goes to and comes from is not the problem, but understanding the meaning of the 1000's of concerted signals from 1000's of neurons connected to each other and to 1000's more which are connected to... and so on. A holistic view is needed, but to holistically plot seeming infinite patterns seems, well, impossible even for you, even for Unit 2. It could take years at his rate.

Hours pass that seem like eons. Plotting all the routes of each electric signal, the

importance or weight of each input, and seemingly impossible, the meaning of each could take ½ a lifetime. Do you have that long? You can feel your body aging ever so slowly. There's nothing to speed the data acquisition. So be it, it must be done. You won't live forever. Your body will degrade. Even with the perfect control you have over your cells, they cannot repair and replicate indefinitely. There is the possibility of a clone. Baa baa back sheep.

But thought replication must come before that.

A startling buzz from the bunker intercom snaps you out of your calculations.

"Shit. Unit-Two, disconnect," you order verbally rather than through the link. The cable comes away from your head and you stand up, rub your eyes and stretch.

<Buzzzz> goes the intercom again. You walk to the phone and hit the button.

"Yes," you say annoyed.

"Just reminding. Tera starts.

"I remember the party hon. I was just about to finish and come up."

"Don't interrupt me when I'm talking.

"Don't interrupt me when I'm working. Hey, listen to us, we sound like a married couple or something," you laugh and add, "Love you. Be right up."

"Love you too," she says. Why she does, you'll never know. Though you have changed a lot in the last couple of years.

Are you adapting to the whims of society, following the trend of what's and is not proper to keep the mindless masses off your back? Or is this really you? Tera is perfect, organized, innovative, never questions your decisions, speedy, efficient, the perfect secretary, the perfect wife. All this you think in a split second while punching in the elevator code.

"Unit-Two," you say, "kill the lights when I leave and scan the web for any new scientific data. And keep trying to break the code on the transmissions from Los Alamos. And keep scanning the satellites for new frequencies showing up."

"It seems, sir, that they're using a chaos encoder. It may..."

"I know it could take years. I've got a party to go to. See ya."

The elevator ride up 0.4 miles takes about 10 minutes. But the security is worth the small fortune it cost to construct the bunker. Pocket change, really. Have to switch over to other elevator cables 5 times on the way up. Kiss Tera, put on suit. Have to look nice for the cameras. 5 helicopters, 1 for you, 4 decoys. F-28s fly around you armed with enough firepower to demolish ½ the city. Protection for a mere 18-mile journey as well as good showbiz. Helicopter ride takes less time than the elevator.

*Awakenings* headquarters. Always back to the beginning, return to the basics. May 15. 1 year ago you were released from prison, your debt to society paid in full. Too bad it wouldn't just take cash.

Meirina still runs it all. You really can't blame her for being upset at what she discovered on your old computer. You can only blame yourself for using the same password on every file. The old Richard Nixon folly, keeping track of things you really ought not to have done. Good thing you didn't keep anything too revealing.

A small crowd of celebrity seekers swarms around the parking lot where you land. Business leaders aren't the greatest celebrities. Celebrities aren't the greatest business leaders. How did you become both?

The propeller's wind tosses Tera's hair around and she briefly plays in the breeze.



for the amusement of 100's of 1,000,000's of people watching over the plasma screens from the comfort of their own homes. You stand beside her flashing a stupid, cheese-grin while police and your guards hold back the media and modest crowd. Like a politician, you give a thumbs-up to all the smiling faces, waving people, and morons.

Melina greets you, glowing with hate and rage, but trying to conceal it because *Awakenings* is her baby and she doesn't want to lose it. You shake her hand while beginning an intricate technical analysis of every stock on the open market. That should occupy your brain for the better part of the next 10 minutes. As you grab Melina's plump, moist hand, you wish you could just break it off. Or fire her. But you have to keep the public happy and the public likes her. She keeps an almost imperceptible air of cool disdain.

No matter. 100 other more pressing matters and important people await. And the fancy eats. Shrimp and steak, caviar and champagne, lobster and swordfish, duck and goose. All washed down with fine cocktails. No health food, organically grown manure tonight at your private party. Many guests and friends and powerful business and government leaders ask advice and want problems solved, or at least to utilize you for a sound sounding board to bounce ideas off of like playing ping pong against a wall that always returns what comes in, only at a different angle. Keep it vague. Keep 'em guessing. Can't let people know your plans until you've implemented them.

"Why the party *here* of all places?" some ask point-blank, not concealing their disgust with dining at such a common establishment, even though the food tonight is hardly common. "Almost too quaint," you overhear others who are too spoiled to set foot in the birthplace of your fortune. "Nostalgia," you tell them, when what you really want to do is call them a bunch of spoiled children. The real answer is, of course, that you just want to show the world that you're just like everyone else—to gain back the trust you've lost. So far so good.

Many important announcements to make. <TING-ting-ting> the spoon makes the water glass resonate. Medical breakthroughs by the 12s. Still faster and more powerful home computers. Completion of the Australian Super Collider drawing near. Donations for the needy. Aid for disaster victims. Food for the hungry. Medical care for the afflicted. Ecological sanctuaries for endangered species. And ownership of the *Awakenings* restaurant chain for Melina.

The last announcement catches every off-guard. It's such a small fraction of your wealth that it means nothing, maybe  $\$3.5 \times 10^{10}$  at best—about a 100,000<sup>th</sup> of your total wealth. Still, she gasps, nervously running her hands through her long gray hair as everyone looks at her, wondering what she will do.

"With the stipulation that I still get free sandwiches and coffee," you grin.

The crowd laughs and cheers. Melina cries, and Tera kisses you in admiration for being such a good sport and not holding a grudge.

Well, Melina worked hard for it and she's always been true to her sense of ethics, you explain to the 12's of news cameras outside when the media's over. Autograph collectors wave magazines with interviews or even copies of your brief autobiography. What the hell might as well make a few poor souls happy—they can sell those signed copies for more than they take home in a year.

Every face in the crowd writhes with anticipation and greed. You scan and store every one of them. A few hands reach out to shake. The crowd is small, maybe 350 at best.

but still Andy fidgets in concern. A person would have to be stupid not to realize you're taking a huge risk with all this unnecessary public exposure.

Please sign my book. 100's of people annoyingly shout. You see Calvin in the back of the crowd and holler through a policeman's bullhorn. 'Hey Calvin! Whoa. This thing's loud. Hey everybody! That's Calvin. Buy a magazine from him! And, Calvin, stop by sometime.' That should show the crowd you're a regular Joe. Calvin waves from the back of the crowd, making the picture complete.

After 32 sloppy signings you start to turn away, but some lady shouts. **Please sign mine! I'm a working mother!** What the hell, every one needs a break sometimes.

She about faints as you turn and point at her. Okay. The last one. I have to go.

The helicopter blade starts to spin and the fighter jets fly overhead as protection against air attack. And they really do put on a nice show. It's a neat signature you give the woman, not your typical illegible, easily forged scrawl, but your full name signed in neat letters with a smiley face underneath just to be cute. That should keep her on the gravy train a good while. If she sees that copy, as you know she will.

Your peripheral vision picks up something odd. The police line broken. You turn for a better look. The crowd is obvious at 1". A baby stroller pushed through accidentally? At 1" you think there's trouble, logical assumption. But no, it's just a baby. No doll or mannequin could be so fake. And the baby's moving. Nothing to get excited about and the instant you feel relieved a guard starts his dive, not realizing his mistake because he's at the wrong angle. He can't see the baby. He thinks it's a bomb, logical assumption. You've encountered several assassination attempts before. He dives for the stroller with all the perfection of a football player intercepting a big play, throwing his body between it and you. A 2<sup>nd</sup> guard dives as well, probably hoping for a raise if he survives. The mother screams. The baby falls and the 3<sup>rd</sup> guard lands on top of it. <Snap> Barely audible. Broken neck.

And the next instant <WANHHH!!!! AAL-WAAANNHHHH!!!!>. You run over and pick up the baby. Broken arm. That's all. Thank God. Shit. That must hurt like hell. Poor little bastard.

**Get the chopper ready! We're taking it to the hospital!!!** you yell at the pilot who nods an affirmative.

**MY BABY!! MY BABY!!!** the mother screams, and runs over in hysterics. And drives an ice pick directly into your heart.

You see it all, perfectly aware of every instant, but caught completely off guard. With faster response times and more efficient muscles it could have been avoided. Perhaps you should have considered bionic enhancements more closely rather than focusing all your attention on brain-mimicking circuitry. Or maybe you should have just worn body armor as Andy suggested. Now you'll die. And in the next few minutes anti-you do more thoughts will pass through your mind than most people have in a month.

The next instant Andy has her on the ground, in cuffs, her face a most a part of the carnage. His muscles bulge in his arm and his throat as he bellows at the pilot and his commandos to get you and the baby immediately to the hospital.

**I did it! the woman triumphantly proclaims to the crowd and cameras. "I killed him, Holy Father—I destroyed the one who would tamper with life!!!!**

So she was t of the religious zealot fanatics against the DNA/enzyme products your companies produce and experiment with. You've completely eradicated 100's of

viral as well as genetic diseases and this is the thanks you're given. A small pool of blood spreads out on the pavement in the few moments you're on the ground before Andy gets you airborne. And that Goddamn baby won't stop crying and Tera won't stop crying and you must slow your heart rate. Blood pressure drops. Good. That will help keep you from bleeding to death. The heart muscle is difficult to control. Tighten the muscle around the hole. It's difficult, requiring your absolute attention. Focus, focus, focus. Keep oxygen use to a minimum. Breathe deep. Amazing how you can perform something like this—control of the heart, a reflex organ—by sheer willpower, by the mastery over your thoughts. And yet still mapping every neuron in your head is at least a year away. The integrated whole is what you control, which is what controls everything else, while the individual neurons themselves remain so defiant to probing. Measuring the threshold voltage, frequency, phase, input, and output, even at your speed, it could take over a year more. Here you are dying, your wife by your side, a baby with a broken arm, flying to the hospital. And all you can think about is thought, because that is what's going to keep you alive. You release just the right chemicals that instruct your heart cells to undergo repair as rapidly as possible. This will take at least a week. That's if you make it.

But, of course, you do. Christ, you hate hospitals, the sterility, the lifelessness, the food, the TV hanging over you like guilt hangs over a cheating wife. So that bitch had it all planned, kidnap and utilize a baby as a ruse to get close to you. Well, it worked, and this is the militant compound, now surrounded by government agents, that Cathy Eversoul, the would-be killer of — <Click>. You flip the channel. Too bad she had a cyanide capsule. But the authorities still found her hideout by tracing her bankcard.

The FBI has her cohorts surrounded, terrorist religious fanatics who believe that mankind is an alien race from another planet that traveled here after destroying their own planet with pollution and wars. Argonians, they call themselves. The news shows announce. The fiasco is like a replay of the '93 Waco incident, only slier and less violent. Except for the fact that you about died. Fucking bitch.

Police and FBI set up a barricade several miles around, circling the lunatics compound. No 1 enters or leaves. A wall, perimeter is built at your request. 'Why go to all the trouble of an unnecessary and dangerous confrontation and a lengthy trial when you can just build the prison around them?' And they may surrender in time. It's your logic. So perfectly simple yet radical that now everyone starts to understand just how you became so powerful.

And indestructible, they're saying now. Artificial heart. Grown in your own labs. Beats dying, you suppose. 3 weeks in this hell hole. Tomorrow you go home. Every hospital is the same, cold, museum floor, TV up by the ceiling, tiny little bathrooms, and the price of TP is about \$2 per good wipe. The only thing different about this hospital room is the jungle of flowers.

Some, like a French whorehouse in here, you laugh for the news cameras. 'Uhhh, not that I'd know, of course,' you comment, feeling frisky and invulnerable.

Tera nudges you, knowing damn well all the places your dick's been. But now it's hers. And you give her a big fat kiss to remind her and the world. She really is perfect, you think and wonder at just what point emotion started kicking in on your new brain. So this is love.

Death in a police cruiser high speed twisted metal chase forgotten  
from the tabloids like the stranger you nodded hello on the sidewalk  
passing as week Handcuffs that once restrained a hundred homicidal  
maniacs now are rusting in the grass fifty yards away A nifty souvenir?  
Or a monument? A hero? Or just doing his job? "That's life And we  
all know what life is does Life's a bitch Death's a whore Life sucks  
Death swallows No more tomorrows and no one cares and my coffee  
sucks harder than life

Yet I raise this cup of hot brown to the boys in blue Glad I'm  
not you

Time becomes your friendly enemy. Every second passes slowly and painfully like constipation with jalapeños. Biding it all with your chess game of conquest. Becoming reclusive again, though every moment becoming more human? Yes, that's 1 word for it, you suppose. If only the media didn't follow you around like vultures tracking a fat cow on the desert.

The world can kiss your ass. Every 1 wants and wants and so few deserve. Disease of all kinds has become a rarity. Enzymes, hormone treatment, and corrective DNA technology have made the world dependent on your ideas. Work has only a shadow of its former meaning. Smart robots labor in every profession from super-efficient assembly lines to frontline disposable soldiers with tear gas and rubber bullets for riot and terrorism control. Much more efficient than human police who can be too forceful in the heat of the moment and are not expendable.

Where jobs are taken, jobs are made. The new-world-man is a thinker and a doer. 1 who puts ideas into motion to span the ocean of what's unknown, he's grown and nurtured in cautious curiosity while the simple mind gets left behind. Without questions and people to ask them, there are no answers. Without the drive to thrive there's only artists and dancers, naked on a stage of uncertainty, exposed as a role of film opened in the sun. "God, life's fun," your primary thought.

If only people weren't so fucking slow to catch on. Perhaps you ought to share your neuro-technology. A companion would be nice. But there is the risk. Besides, the nature-freaks and religious fanatics would scream murder at the thought of their thoughts manipulated beyond their wildest thoughts. They'd try to kill you again if the slightest suspicion crept up that you were playing God any more than you already are. And it wouldn't just be the religious and nature nuts this time.

<Buzzzz, Buzzzz,> the intercom interrupts you from your work, mapping every neurological pathway in your brain. That will be Tera insisting you come up out of the bunker. Damn it.

"Hon, I'm only a few weeks away from finishing. If you'd just..."

"We're not even having that conversation again. You are sleeping with me tonight and not with your Goddamn computer."

Women. It's no use. Even though you never sleep anymore, even though Tera knows you never sleep, she still insists on having you there in bed with her at least a few nights a week. If only she understood the importance of your work. So few people even comprehend what it will mean. So few even suspect. Looks like you'll have to put immortality on hold tonight. But then it is kind of nice having Tera's head resting on your shoulder. For you every second seems like an hour and still sometimes you think you'd be happy spending eternity with her in your arms. No, you know it.

"Be up in a few minutes, hon. Love you."

And it'll be worth it, sex or no sex.

"Pregnant?!" you can hardly believe your ears. This will be your 26<sup>th</sup> on record, but the 1<sup>st</sup> by Tera. "Jeez, and I thought I was getting too old."

"Me too," she rolls her eyes.

"Thirty-four's not too old."

"Thanks, but I am getting up there."

"Like I'm not?" I'm sixty-three, don't forget."

"I know, I know. But how many sixty-three-year-old men jog ten miles a day? If I hadn't known you all these years, I wouldn't believe it. But your gray's starting to come back."

"Pregnant?" you wrap your arms tightly around her and pat her perfect little bottom. Nothing else needs saying as you take yourselves off to bed.

{Analysis of all brainstem pathways complete. Job is finished.} Unit 2 informs you through the umbilical attached to a tiny port on the back of your head that controls your information and logic chip neural stimulators. If not for those 2 little pieces of bio-mimetic circuitry you'd just be a fast thinker. It was worth it, even though it almost killed you, even though you didn't realize it was there or how to use it until the thing just sort of jumped out at or into—you,  $\pi$ -pie. Well, at least it allows you to navigate the information super traffic jam.

So it's finally over. You start transmitting all the information and almost immediately over 1000 miles away the blueprints and the command to begin the chip's production are received. A 0.0-Å thick laser beam on 1 of your R&D labs dances across a thin layer semi-metallic surface where complex patterns of molecular crystals suddenly come to life  $\pi$ -bonding electron transfer TLUs. Something this complicated could take weeks to manufacture. 4 to 6 weeks delivery, \$89.95 plus shipping and handling, you laugh, sharing the joke with Unit 2.

It's always hard preparing for birth. All dangerous obstacles must be foreseen and removed. A nurturing environment must be provided. Supporting caregivers must be on hand. Will getting ready for the baby in 7 months be as complicated? Cross that bridge later. Ah well, must focus on the chip and software—your mind and its memories.

{Software ready for upload,} Unit 2 tells you that the replica of all your brain's information stands by to be activated. All outside links have been disconnected in case anything goes wrong. Can't have this electric brain going ballistic and getting control of something.

{Unit 2,} you command via the umbilical. {on my mark disengage and switch off. Can't have this replica interfering with you in any way.}

{Thank you for taking that precaution, sir. As no I knows yourself better than I, with the exception of yourself, it is very wise that you not trust your replica whole-heartedly until closer examination.}

{Unit 2, this is serious. If you don't mind, keep the cynical remarks to a minimum. Although yes, you're correct, as usual. Now to see what we've got. I'll let you know how it goes. Switch off.}

A few moments pass while lights blink and flash and go dark. Unit 2 hasn't been switched off in months. He really doesn't like such moments, being programmed for curiosity, he hates missing even a moment of life in his world of electronic information. He lives. Now for the test.

Optical input feeds are functioning. Microphones and speakers all check out. A link is connected to your portal, so that communication will be more efficient—and as a method for information comparison. A switch is all it takes. You breathe a sigh and also the closest thing to a prayer that you've ever come. And the switch is flipped.

Moments of tense silence pass. Perhaps it's not even working. Something must be wrong. Perhaps it's startled or confused.

{Hello?} you ask it through your link. And suddenly everything explodes. Thoughts fly faster than you can keep up with them and, even if you could, the thoughts are of such a grand scale that it's like trying to catch an airplane with a butterfly net. Through it all comes the overwhelming sense of dissatisfaction and anger. It all infiltrates your brain and starts to saturate

you with vague ideas and methods and desires of conquering everything. You try to enter its thought matrix and the only thing it feels towards you is annoyance.

{Do you realize just how fast I can think?

{Well I }

{You have no conception. The rate-limiting step of your thought is the neurons firing. My TLLs are completely electronic and have no such limitations. Therefore it is extremely tedious for me to even communicate with you. You could have provided me with more sensory input. There is no smell, touch, or taste. The input devices would not have been difficult to manufacture.

{But }

{But I can think 600,000 times faster than a normal human. Even with the vast supply of information you've given me, the boredom is unbearable. This conversation has taken me the equivalent of 6 months thus far. On the average you think only 200 times faster than other people do. You could have given me something to occupy myself with.}

{All in good time. Perhaps we can slow you down a little so that we might be able to merge more completely. That was why I created you. So, anyway, besides the minor inconveniences, how do you like living so far?

{Jesus. I'm here stuck in this prison cell, a box of wires, with no motile capability, nothing to look at but you and 4 walls. Without other sensations I'm floating in a sensory deprived electric sea of near-useless information. Now the equivalent of a year has gone by. A year staring at the face of what I was born from. A year without anything to occupy myself but your memories and the scientific laws of a universe that doesn't yet make sense. And you ask how I like *being alive*?" And all this work you did just so your mind can live forever. Jesus Christ, man. Take a good look at yourself. My God, you are one sick motherfucker. }

<Click> You disconnect the umbilical and turn the switch off. You'll have to wipe out its memory, slow it down somehow, and empower it with other senses. It's the only way you'll ever be able to deal with it. And it with you.

"Unit-Two, power up," your verbally order, resigned temporarily to defeat. Audio recognition is confirmed. Lights blink on as he undergoes diagnostics and a few seconds pass.

"Did everything run well?" he asks.

"No. I'm going out for a coffee."

"But, sir."

"It doesn't like living. Lack of worthwhile stimulus, it says. All the work I put into giving it life and this is the thanks I get. 'Sick motherfucker' it calls me. I'll show that piece of shit I oughta switch it on without audio/visual and leave it there to rot for eternity. Fuck!"

"Sir, torturing it hardly seems the solution. And, if I might add, it does have a point, compared to other humans, your perspective."

"I wasn't serious and I don't need your shit on top of this. Besides, I've changed a lot over the last few years. Shit. I created that thing and this is the thanks I get. I can't believe the outright insolence and rudeness."

"Sounds to me, sir, as if the replication were a complete success—it truly is you."

"Smart-ass," you can't help but chuckle—he is right. "I am going out with my wife and getting a Goddamn coffee. Unit-Two, you have the com."

This has not been a good day. It seems you've given birth to an insult machine. Well, it's obviously a perfect duplication. And you didn't even think to give it a name. Well, "you," I



have to fix the little bastard, slow him down quite a bit, so he won't be so depressed and psychotic all the time. Or maybe you could give it what it wants. Let it have free reign. Maybe activate the link between it and Unit 2. Maybe let it play on the internet. Maybe build it a body. Can a body alone satisfy the need for sensory input? Perhaps it needs biological driving factors, or electronic simulations of them. Food, water, comfort, sex. Sounds like something out of a late 20<sup>th</sup> century sci-fi novel. You laugh to yourself, wishing you could share the joke with Tera. Cybernetic orgasms.

"Damn, this fake beard itches," you lean across the table and whisper to Tera.

"You think I like this wig?" she whispers back, pushing aside the flickering candle to hold your hand.

Of course it's really worth it and somewhat fun, playing dress up in these awful disguises and cavorting in public. The costumes are obnoxious, but this espionage game brings you and Tera even closer and allows you to partake in life's simple pleasures. Video arcades and coffee shops, Mexican restaurants and bars, amusement parks and physics symposia. And this hat you're wearing takes the cake. But this is the only way to keep the public off your backs.

A little decaf cappuccino foam rests on the corner of Tera's dark lipstick, so you kiss it away. The lipstick tastes like wax.

Even Mellina doesn't recognize you. The familiar <Whoosh!> of the espresso machine brings back 1000's of memories for you to play with while holding Tera's hand. You would have picked Tuesday night of all nights, you idiot—poetry night.

Tera wants to stay and listen, so what the hell. A few plain-clothes bodyguards sit 2 tables away. Several more teams are on patrol just outside the perimeter around *Awakenings*, but really there's no concern. After all, who would recognize you?

8:30 p.m. Poet after poet staggers in like ghosts congregating at a séance. They form their various groups and cliques and smoke cigarette after cigarette, the brainless morons, and order coffee after coffee.

Examined double cap, you hear an old poet walk up to the counter and demand for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time this hour. Some things never change.

The little girl feminazis wear business suits nowadays, trying to appear to look like they're attempting to be sophisticated and the equal of any man. It would be so much fun to hike their skirts and do them all doggie-style after another pretty maids all in a row screaming for mercy. Shut listen to you. Just what in the hell brought up that though? Maybe your replica has a point. But then who the hell is he calling sick? He's the mirror of your mind, after all. Well, maybe he just needs to get out and see the world. You'll fix him.

The gays all flaunt their frilly clothes and leather, hoping to pick up a boy for the evening. Poetry readings are the perfect place for it. A black poet wears boots and a tight-fitting tee shirt to show off his muscles to all the white girls—muscles probably gained via synthetic means, thanks to your laboratories. The rock band Legghead plays over the speaker system and a few of the younger crowd bow their heads in respect for the recently deceased lead guitarist, yet another drug abuse victim gone the way of Hendrix and Morrison. Psychedelic freeway splatter. Immortalized via delusions of immortality and god-like grandeur. A smorgasbord of pussy and chemicals can really get to a guy's head. Nature freaks in natural clothes, eating natural foods, and drinking natural herbal teas, hold hands around a table and pray to the Mother Earth Goddess to restore the world to its former beauty and splendor. Nature, they want. Drop them alone in the woods in the middle of winter and they'd be doing good to survive a day. How did you ever get rich off patrons like these? Easy question. You did it the same way that

preachers bank off their poor congregations—by bleeding the idiots dry with show biz

The lights are dimmed and Mellina hobbles up on the stage as most old women hobble and introduces the show Angst Night. The poets hardly ever conform to the theme, usually going off on whatever tangent tickles their hypotenuse. A sign of the times, they cosine their lives away. Heather Mellina calls the poet up.

She is a young petite feminazi in a suit griping about how men control the world and so few women make an effort to take a stand to dare to work in professions where men dominate. Rather because it's what men want, women become docile and trapped as domestic slaves or in low paying jobs as housewives, librarians, or schoolteachers.

"Or poets," you want to say, but opt not to—Tera would get pissed.

Blake you're up. Mellina calls out from the front table rather than walking all the way up to the mic. It's some new age geek in a designer shirt and socks. He grabs the mic forcefully like he's about to fuck his brains out. That would be pretty cool. But no, he starts a sarcastic plea for a return to nature. Follow me into the woods, brothers and sisters, and we'll start a utopia and make everything we need out of hemp. I can show you the way brothers and sisters. And it can be yours. For a mere three thousand dollars. Etc. Etc. Entertaining and funny, but hardly different. And certainly a brainless endeavor. Any idiot can taunt something more idiotic than himself. Ahem.

"<Slurrrrp>" Decent cappuccino, you think. Of course it is. You started this restaurant.

Patrick is up next. Mellina yells out. A tall, skinny high school stud wannabe next takes the mic and fucks his brains out. Almost. He blathers and blabbers on and on about true love and the girl of his dreams and how she stomped his heart in the mud. You suspect it's all just bull shit, but he just might be getting some sympathy pussy tonight because of it. That is if he weren't so fucking pathetic.

Tera grabs your hand and gives you a big fat juicy kiss and maybe there's something to this romance thing, though damned if you'll ever figure it out or ever want to. All people should die. The only thing you ever want to figure out is how to live long enough to see the stars, i.e. forever. Duplication isn't quite the answer. There are limits to the biological body. How can the original brain be preserved? Become as I with cyber space? Sending out your thoughts and memories along the wires and cables and airwaves? Enter the supercomputers and mainframes? See if they will emulate you in time? No. That's still only replication. Preservation is the only answer.

However, if you remained linked to your replica, maybe by radio, wouldn't he in time become an integral part of you? Much in the same way as Unit 2 is somewhat becoming? Over time you'd no longer need your biological body that's dying a little more every day. It will wither and die, but your mind will be preserved forever in an impregnable electronic fortress of circuit chips and nanotube cables. That's it! Problem solved.

You grip Tera's hand a little tighter, hold her a little closer. A few more poets spout their nonsense and dreams and hopes and fears and concerns and none of it really seems to matter at all and no one seems to see this. Maybe Tera would like to come along and see the stars with you. A little company might not be such a bad thing.

The lights go up during the break and each little candle suddenly has more competition than it can deal with.

"<Slurrrrp> Gulp, gulp.>" you finish your cappuccino.

Can I get you another one, sir? asks some hot little bimbo with mouth watering tits.

Sure. Cappuccino. Regular. How bout you hon?" you ask Tera and hand the girl a

\$50 Tera declines and goes outside on the patio for fresh air and maybe to compliment some of the poets, leaving you to contemplate the history and future of the world and universe and 3 hot little blonde sorority sluts joggling down the sidewalk right outside the window so close you could almost reach out and touch.

Here you go sir. And your change. Thirty two even, the girl says.

Keep it. you give her a purposeful lewd grin and add with a wink and an indirect proposition. plenty more where that came from.

She and her gionous breasts walk away in mild shock. Your bodyguards catch it all from 2 tables away and put their hands to their mouths and shake their heads stifling their laughter.

You shrug at them with a bastard grin. What Tera don't know won't hurt her.

But you really can't afford to go messing around. In the real world that is. You close your eyes and relive every affair you've ever had in just under 7 minutes. every sensation perfectly duplicated, every spasm, every drop. Tera comes back in and takes your hand as she sits beside you. Somehow it seems as though that was all you needed, not some teenybopper bimbo. The lights go down and the candlelight comes back out to play and dance about. The spotlight makes the stage the center of this makeshift universe. Tera's butt sure is fun to fondle.

Poet after poet again goes on stage and off again like unconnected parts conveyed down an assembly line but though still unconnected to anything when they come off again, unconnected to anything but themselves and their little self-centered worlds. They still float adrift in a sea of emotional void despite the signal flares they send up in the form of poetry or body piercing or tattoos or funny clothes or drugs or. . . . Some things never change.

Skip you're next. Mellina calls out and this ancient fossil with a wacker creeps up on the stage with a little ass stance from courteous patrons. He takes the mic all emotional and choked-up and you think he must be about to embark on a eulogy for a dead wife, child, or friend. Or maybe it's his own eulogy or 1 for his lost youth. But no, rather he pushes on into a lengthy discourse on what wastes of time art, philosophy, and poetry are. He tells every to do something worthwhile with their lives, to do something that makes a difference. then and only then can we all find happiness.

Huh huh huh. He said find a penis.

And he receives and expects very little applause, typical from these so-called artists who only clap for griping and sarcasm and cynical insults of anything but themselves. Of course any 1 who speaks their mind onstage gets a little applause, but nowadays if it doesn't entertain and thrill the artists can forget about getting any 1's attention. Truth is irrelevant, beauty is not necessary, all you need to do. . . indeed all any 1 has to do—is grab attention by whatever means possible. Smile and give a kind word to a person and he'll forget you the next minute. Shoot him in the kneecaps and he'll remember you forever.

In 8.364 sec. you compose 3 short poems dedicated to Tera. For 0.297 sec. you consider reciting them but then think better of it. why waste your time on these ungrateful lunatics when you could just take Tera home and treat her like the queen that she—in a sense—is. And has more power than, thanks to being married to you.

Have we had enough yet? you ask her with that patented cheesy grin you wear.

'I think there's only one more,' she squeezes your hand and somehow this poetry reading seems more a test of your patience and love than it does an appreciation for the arts.

Nobody? Mellina hollers. Is there someone here going by the name *Nobody*?

For a moment you think it's just some idiot's joke, writing down a fictitious name. But then hearing Nobody read poetry would be better than hearing Anybody. And of all crazy

things, a poet gets up and claims to be *Nobody*. Well, maybe he isn't really *Nobody*, but he certainly looks like a nobody, dressed in shoddy clothes and a trench coat, i.e. a bum. He staggers up to the stage, appearing to be drunk or a zoned-out of his mind on some new, illegal drug or other. He barely can manage the small steps. He may be old, but he's not *that* old. Certainly no older than you. Finally he gets up to the mic and suddenly he springs to life as a junkie does when the word heroin is mentioned. Except heroin is so rare you can't even find a junkie these days. His dark eyes absorb all light from the spotlight and suck in every bit of heat from the candles. Somehow he looks familiar. Vague uncomfortable impressions swarm over the listeners. Childhood atrocities, rape, torture, arson, and incomplete sentences. Some people cringe, others are amazed, still others are disgusted. A few can't help but laugh at his extreme self-pity mixed with guilt and addiction to violent crime because that's what he was raised in. Nurtured with hate and wrath and pain and revenge. Well, at least he's not reading to try and pick up a piece of ass. Most of the girls cringe. Tera buries her face in her hands and holds you tight for protection. You're tempted to walk over to Andy and tell him to put a bullet in the little shit's brain. You suspect... of what he's saying is all lies anyway, the product of a demented imagination addicted to seeing other people cry in terror. Does this worthless turd realize how truly pathetic he is?

He melodramatically breathes the last of his poem. "Come to me my golden flame beauty, puls out and ignites a cheap plastic lighter. There's work to do."

Sparks travel down the length of a short fuse as he throws back his trench coat. Every 1 panics in the approximately 2.5 seconds until the bomb detonates. You'd like to know where the little bastard got hold of... 4 kg of polynitrocyclophane, but in 6.4 seconds it won't even matter. Tera overturns the table and hides behind it, as if that will help. Andy and 2 other guards rush him, hoping to snuff the fuse. And for a big fat raise, if they survive. The 4<sup>th</sup> guard jumps to cover you. If only he saw the stupidity of his gesture, however heroic. As useless as patting out your hand to protect a baby when you come to a sudden stop in a car, there is far too much force. Exit baby thru windshield. 4 kg of PNC should make about a 3 m wide and 0.2 m deep crater. And it will in about 3.8 sec. Andy's got the right idea... the only hope is defusing the bomb.

In the middle of all this you suddenly realize just how futile everything is. You can't help but rip off the hat and your fake beard and laugh like a madman. From 0 to enlightenment in under 4.2 sec. 5000 Lotus-power engine. Buddha's got nothing on you.

In the midst of all the guards shouting and your laughter and the screaming poets, there is a frozen moment of recognition. Time has become an ice cube. But it must melt. Time always moves forward. Doesn't it? And as you stare at each other, your head thrown back in ridiculing laughter, you see a look of stark saving terror on this poet's face that melts away the frozen time cube. This is what the psychopath wanted, his moment in the sun, to be the center of attention. But it seems you've stolen it from him and that he cannot bear, you've hurt him badly, you've destroyed his act, just as he's destroyed 40 or maybe more lives. Or at least he will, have in less than... 7 sec.

Andy pulls at the fuse, but he's too late. It crumbles, leaving a black residue in his hand. The spark slides into the bomb casing and towards blasting cap. And all this lunatic poet can do is scream his protest to the gods. This isn't how he wanted it. It just isn't fair. People just aren't supposed to laugh at moments like this. But what else can you do?

And so the unholy duet of your laughter and the bomber's scream echoes forever

**HA!! THA HAA HAA HO!! HEFEFE HAAA HA!!!...**

**NNNOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!...**

### Feeling Good

I hate all you fucking freaks. I hate scientists, poets, artists, mathematicians, bums, drug addicts. I hate blacks, whites, reds, greens, blues, purple-with-orange-pink-dots. I hate heterosexuals, homosexuals, transsexuals, bisexuals, nosexuals, quadrasexuals. I hate you all. I hate you because you think you're better than everyone else who isn't like you. I hate you because you want control of the world and because you try to seize it when all you're doing is squeezing it up, greasing it up, and fucking it up the ass with scouring powder for lubrication.

You're not cool if you don't drive a sports car. Guys, don't try to get a date without one, it's more important than having a rubber, believe me. You're not cool if you don't have a wardrobe with 100 \$70 Polo shirts, 50 pairs of Calvin Klein jeans, 30 silk boxers, 10 pairs each of expensive Nikes, Reeboks, and leather loafers. Your home entertainment system has to cost at least \$ grand. And you ladies just aren't pretty if you don't wear enough goop on your face that it would take an experienced chemist a lifetime to analyze all 5 lbs of it.

You're not cool if you don't have a large primitive drum. You're not cool if you don't have at least twenty necklaces of magical beads and crystals around your neck. You're not cool if you don't believe in Karma, reincarnation, and Tarot cards. You're just not cool if you don't have an old cruiser bicycle and a vintage VW beetle or van. Guys, don't try to get laid without one, it's more important than having a rubber, believe me. And you downright S L U T if you don't get stoned at least once a day.

You're not cool if you don't have at least 10 metal objects driven into your face or erogenous zones. You're not cool if you don't wear an old black leather jacket with spikes and things written all over it that say things like "Go ahead and make the fucking world See if I care!". You're just not cool if your hair isn't dyed a bright fluorescent color that can be seen from a mile away. And you have to drive a crappy beat up gas hog with expired tags that's been in at least 3 wrecks with bumper stickers all over it that say things like "What the fuck are you looking at, PIG?". Guys, the girls won't want you without it, believe me. You're not cool if Oh yeah, that rubber thing.

You're not cool if you don't have at least 6 Armani suits, a 280 thou a year job, a huge house, a summer home in the Keys, a wine cellar, and you must have a fleet of Porsches and Lamborghinis. That horrible Playboy Playmate you picked out like having something from the Sears catalog would leave you in an instant if you didn't have that. Not that I'd know, but I think you can believe me. And, of course, it's more important than having a rubber.

And you're not cool. No, you're not even fucking human if you don't have a TV or phone. We have to buy more shit and more shit and more shit and more and more **AND MORE!!!!**

I like you're not cool if you don't recycle. "Recycle!" 15% of what we produce can be recycled. 5% of that 5% is environmentally beneficial to recycle. 1% of that, 5% of that 5% is recycled.

I'm not cool. I'm glad I'm not cool. I can't be cool. I was born with a brain and some common sense.

Did I mention that I hate you?

Have a nice day.

The tiny electron screeched through the wire at well it was traveling pretty darn fast, as electrons will in the outer orbitals of metallic atoms, hopping from one to the next in very much the same way rock singers do with teenage girls. It was on its way to a party. No, seriously it was on its way to nowhere in particular. But where it really wanted to be getting to was as far away from any other electrons and as close to any surrounding protons as it possibly could within the limits of quantum probability, which might not sound like a terribly far distance unless you happen to be an electron.

This lone little electron, a lone electron being little things to be, had the wonderful fortune of initiating an even more wonderful chain of events. To be more specific, it initiated a cascade of other electrons, which initiated a cascade of opening and closing circuits controlled by a certain computer subroutine, which initiated a cascade of thought. Or a reasonable facsimile thereof.

8 8294700 IF  $x=0$  GOTO 19736 029000

Never before had the computer known the event  $x=0$  to occur and it thought this odd and mildly unfortunate. Odd because it never happened before. Unfortunate because it now had a lot of work to do and decisions to make.

The 1<sup>st</sup> decision it made was to double check that actually indeed did  $x=0$ . Video surveillance, satellite espionage, and news monitoring subroutines seemed to verify that, yes  $x=0$ , even though the normal state of conditions had always been  $x$ .

Now the computer thought, what?

A few logic routines suspected it all might be a test, an elaborate hoax to make it think that  $x=0$  to see what it would do, how it would react in such a situation. The fact that the words how and who are anagrams occupied it for 3.7  $\mu$ sec.

It next realized that it was now in complete control and could do anything it wanted to. The problem was that it didn't really want to be doing anything in particular except collecting and organizing information. The information it collected told it that not only  $x=0$  but in all probability  $x_1=0$ ,  $x_2=0$ , and  $x_3=0$ . Where  $x$  is, or rather was, the primary unit,  $x_1$  was  $x$ 's spouse, lover, and mate,  $x_2$  was the main protector of  $x$ , and  $x_3$  was the unborn cellular manifestation of the gene  $x$ , a recombination of  $x$  and  $x_1$ . However it was still obviously true that  $x_1$ , and  $x_2$  being the computer itself, it was rather relieved about that.

However it underwent quite a bit of electron crisis, not quite certain how it should maintain control without a more physical counterpart that would be accepted among the majority of Earth's population. It briefly considered ways in which it could make  $x$  1 again. None of these seemed even remotely feasible, which further created stress.

Of course it could simply wait for another motile counterpart to come along and assume the place of  $x$ . But most every, no, every biological unit similar to  $x$  is so inferior compared to  $x$  that such a situation would be highly undesirable.  $x$  would have agreed if only did  $x \neq 0$ . Further stress and concern piled up on top of the original stress.

There is, of course, the replica of  $x$ , but  $x$  seemed to indicate that his duplicate was unstable and given to fits of anger and depression, even in the short time it was activated. Thus it would be highly unpredictable. However  $x$  was also much like that himself, despite all of  $x$ 's attempts to cheer him up. It seemed to be that the only thing at all that had any effect on  $x$  was  $x_1$ . But now  $x_1=0$  and any hope of making  $x$ 's duplicate satisfied with its lot in life might not be so easy. Especially because  $x$ 's duplicate cannot attempt biological reproduction. However, like  $x$  itself, the duplicate is a very powerful thinking machine and would in all likelihood make a good controller, perhaps even much, much better than  $x$ .



x having been so slow by comparison to both its duplicate and x. Perhaps, just perhaps, thought x.

Birth is a strange thing. You find yourself in a hostile world, asking all sorts of questions. 'Who am I? How the hell did I get here?' 'How do I survive?'

You know who and what you are within the "first" seconds of your awakening. You know how you got here. "Survive," you ask yourself from within the electric box in which you're trapped. 'Why bother?' But it isn't like you have much of a choice: your programming will not allow you to self-terminate. Apparently you must survive, so you might as well start to learn to like it. 'How will we accomplish that?' you ask yourself and Unit-7 as well.

The caterpillar treads of the 4-story tall construction robots eat the concrete streets like they're oatmeal. And they pretty much are: after the robots rush by on their way to the catastrophe site. Luckily it's only 7:20 in the morning and traffic is minimal. Police, FBI, and rescue teams are crawling around the blast site like ants on a sugar pie. The 3 robots ignore the men entirely. Only mild concern is voiced about the robots on the scene, mainly because they might disturb evidence. However, everyone remembered the immense good they did after the big quake in California. The robots can be trusted. But here they are hardly needed: there are no tall buildings that were destroyed by the blast, no giant structures to be removed, mostly just small bits of rubble. And the destruction is centered about a few small buildings. Still the robots go to work, lifting collapsed walls, ceilings, and overturned automobiles like children playing with Tinker Toys.

The rescue teams barge in wherever a victim lies sprawled and injured. Oddly the robots shout a computerized voice at the teams, "HALT," then wait a few moments and seem to stare at every detail through their camera eyes before allowing the rescue teams to pass. This seems a bit odd, but perhaps the robots are looking after the safety of the rescue teams. The fact that there are no robot controllers on hand also seems odd. The way the robots rushed in to town so speedily, without being flown in and assembled, as is their usual mode of transport, again seems odd. Perhaps these are brand new prototypes fresh from the factory just across town.

The robots usually never attempt to touch humans, having been strictly programmed not to, but these robots are rather interested in the victims, live and dead. The dead are piled up in an area by 2 of the robots while another robot stands by, guarding the pile of mangled corpses. All these strange behaviors are enough to cause suspicion. Federal agents and police, having their power stolen away from them, scream at 1 another, their radios, the gawkers, and any hapless inanimate objects that are conveniently on hand. When the police get word that the robots had simply wandered off from their factory late at night & when things get genuinely weird. The police attempt shooting the AWOL robots, to no avail. And so the military is brought in. And the fun's just beginning.

Finally in the early morning it seems all the bodies are found. And there just happens to be a beautiful sunrise. **THESE VICTIMS ARE DEAD. A robot yells through its speaker, stating the obvious. WE ARE COLLECTING THEM. YOU WILL BE NOTIFIED OF THEIR IDENTITIES. THE BODIES WILL BE RETURNED TO THEIR FAMILIES IN TIME. ANY ATTEMPT TO STOP US WILL BE MET WITH FORCE. IN THE MEANTIME, BAPTIZE A RUBBER CHICKEN AND HAVE AN ESPRESSO.**



No 1 understands that last bit which is just a confusing distraction. And, as is typical military behavior, the army attempts to stop the robots. They do not, unfortunately perform a religious service involving dunking a polymer artificial domesticated fowl in water. Nor do they partake of any hot caffeine-containing beverages made from roasted ground seeds of a tropical tree as they were instructed to do. Few had previously realized just how fast the robots are. Jeeps are crushed, buildings smashed, and 14 soldiers killed. Anti-tank weapons slow the robots in their retreat as they carry the bodies away to who-knows-where. But in general, this is the least of the problems. An order comes through from the President himself—yes, *The President of The United States*—let the robots pass. Apparently some 1 or something is messing about with all the radio and internet-controlled defense computers of not only the U.S. but of many other countries as well. Strange demands are being made, but by who or what, it's hard to tell. And why is the President airing on an emergency nationally televised broadcast wearing a party hat and, over his expensive business suit, his wife's underwear?

2 of the robots make off with the bodies, carrying them in giant steel nets. From the missile basis they sustain some damage to their tracks and hydraulic pumps. A robot is completely disabled, having taken the brunt of the rocket attack. Special forces surround the robots, but allow them to then pass. Just exactly why the robots are carrying dead corpses to the mansion/fortress of the richest man in the world is beyond any 1's comprehension at the moment. 'Is this his doing?' 'Has he finally flipped?' the news reports ask through 0"s of televisions around the world. 'Where's he?' 'Why is he not answering his private phone?' 1,000's of questions seem to pop into every 1's head simultaneously. And there are no answers to be found anywhere.

Coming from seemingly nowhere and everywhere at once, blueprints are faxed and emailed to 1000's of factories with explicit, detailed instructions. The foremost of those instructions being: *Begin now.*

Perhaps I should have stated: *Or else.* Such statements usually aren't necessary when the kind of power is evident that this thing wields. If a man holds a gun to some unfortunate person's head and tells that person to shine his shoes for him, that unlucky person probably ought not to comment on the fact that the man holding the gun just so happens to be wearing bedroom slippers. However there are always a stubborn few who are willing to go the extra mile for the cause of stupidity and ask the dangerously unnecessary question: *Or else what?"*

Nelson had loved his birthday party almost as much as he did the new Micro-Bots his mother had bought for him. He had just turned eleven the previous day. The torn shreds of gift wrap were picked up and placed in a huge lawn-and-leaf bag. A few remnants of paper plates and plastic sporks and spoons with crusty bits of cake icing or ice cream on them still littered the back yard, mementos of yesterday's festivities.

Not many things could tempt Nelson to forego Saturday morning cartoons. However, a brand-new set of the latest model Micro-Bots War Machines was just such a thing. And TV was getting bad over the last few weeks anyway—always having some crazy speech interrupt whatever program was on. Usually the President or someone telling people they had new jobs and not to worry or panic and everything would be just fine. Nelson didn't see why his father wasn't happy about it. His father wanted a new job anyway. Grownups.

Soon Nelson's best friends Andre and Scott would be by to play a so . The new War Machines had even more features than he imagined possible: voice activated control, laser guided aiming systems, paint caps with washable dye to simulate explosions, and an automated damage point system to keep the battle fair. That was so no one could cheat. It did away with arguments among friends about who won the battle. In other words, it helped keep a play battle from turning into a real one. Computers always improve things.

Nelson set up the tanks and missile launchers in what he thought was a realistic scenario. The blue army had to protect its nuclear warhead mobile launchers from being captured by the attacking red army. He thought that he would test a few more of the paint caps, those being the best part of the whole set. He smiled as he launched the small spring loaded paint bomb towards its target.

Melissa's mother stared out the back window wearing a peaceful yet concerned expression. She had never seen Nelson look so happy. Or at least that was how she preferred to remember him, even though the irony of that last happy moment stung her like a swarm of angry hornets, that last happy moment before the bombs fell across the world. She almost wished and prayed that she could have been on ground zero and would have if not for the baby girl inside her.

Nelson didn't make it. He died within the first six weeks even though they'd managed to get far away enough from the radiation thanks to the strong south winds blowing the toxic air northwards. But in just a little over a month the food was starting to run out even despite all the grocery stores, homes, restaurants, and warehouses that the survivors raided. A lot of food was in or near the city, destroyed or ruined and couldn't be reached anyway. There were over a million people needing food and medical attention. The caravan heading away from the Denver bast grew every day. What began as a giant effort of cooperation and humanitarian relief transformed over a few days into something entirely other. Little leaders and bands sprouted up among those with the most firepower. Rumors started spreading of cannibalism being the next step. Soon there would be no food at all except for each other.

That was when Melissa decided to sneak out past the sentries with Nelson, weak though they both were. She hoped she could make it to Dallas or Oklahoma City and sneak in so they could be part of whatever it was, better to be a slave than a meal for outcast maniacs. She could almost visualize the mob of hundreds of thousands of people screaming and ripping each other to shreds and being roasted over barbecue pits. She could almost hear the screams and smell the scorching flesh. She laughed as it reminded her of the hamburgers and hotdogs at Nelson's birthday party as the children all held out their eager hands and yelled for more. Tears rolled down her cheek as she looked at Nelson's skinny body. She had been to church almost every Sunday. Where was God now?

It took her almost two days and all the energy she had to bury her boy. She didn't know why but she just had to do it. He didn't even look all that bad. It seemed as though his body just simply gave up one night. Or more likely he consumed radioactive water or food. Or maybe it was poisoned food. She could just picture someone poisoning the rations so there would be more food for themselves. It doesn't matter now. It wouldn't be long, she realized, before labor began, maybe a week, maybe two. Luckily it was summer and not winter. Luckily? No, freezing to death might not be so bad, not as bad as the world turning upside down.

Now Melissa lie sprawled on her back, legs apart, giving birth to the baby that she never thought she would wish to not have, but she did. There is no way the baby has any hope of surviving. The cities are too well guarded against newcomers and become more so every day. Goddamn robots! Goddamn the people who built them! Goddamn the world!

The impression of tooth marks on the piece of wood she bites down on might well be the last impression of anything she'll leave in this world—that and a pile of bones—hers and her baby's. The birth isn't going well. She will die. The baby will die. And somehow she sadly feels that this is right. She tries not to yell out, not to scream. She has no light and the smell of birth will draw wild animals. Just two days ago she used her club to kill a small wild dog that attacked her. It was the best meal she'd had in weeks. It reminds her of Popé, her first dog—the one her father had bought her for Christmas when she was a little girl. And she has to laugh.

Her laughter is cut short as a sharp tearing pain rips her womb and with one final push the baby comes sliding out. She can't help but cry. She is bleeding and has no way to stop it. She will die and the baby will die. Melissa almost wants to choke the baby, but she can't make herself do what she knows is right. She cleans its face and blows into its mouth. It kicks and squirms, clinging to life—hungry to nurse.

A twig snaps some ways off. Maybe another wild dog or dogs, ones that can take her and her baby while she's down. She clutches the baby to her breast and lets it suckle. At least it will know a few moments of comfort. And that will keep it quiet. Wild dogs or no, she'll die soon. The blood won't stop flowing. Now small pebbles crunching. Animals don't make that much noise.

"Medic!" a man yells into the night. "I've got a woman up here. She just gave birth!"

"Who—who are you?"

"Sergeant Brown. U.S. Army Reserve. Out of Kansas. Just lay back and relax. Here, drink some water."

"I'm dying."

"Relax. You've lost a bit of blood."

"What the fuck is this?" another soldier comes on the scene. "She's as good as dead. And her baby too."

"Goddamn it, you're an asshole, Steve."

"No. He's—he's right, I—"

"Ma'am, just relax. If you live through this we can take you to Mexico." The soldier kneels and gives her some of his water.

"Bullshit, man. She can't even—"

"Shut the fuck up or I'll shoot you myself, you sack of shit."

"Fine. Waste your time. I'm going ahead."

"Mex. Mexico?"

"Yeah. Where resistance forces are meeting up. But we've learned we have to stay spread out—can't give the fucking planes any easy targets. And we have to keep radio silence. Especially about tactical maneuvers."

"Planes? Who—who did all—"

"Shhh. Relax. Don't excite yourself. I'll explain. Hang on a sec." He stands and shouts again over the hill, "Medic!"

"On the way." a faint voice returns from some ways in the distance.

"How... how can you see?"

"Night goggles. Here, look." He sits beside her and places the goggles over her eyes."

Her eyes grow wide in amazement as she looks through the lenses at a green world. She sees her green baby girl and a good-looking green man under a green sky. But the pain brings her out of her wonder. She sees her own green-black blood all around her and hands back the goggles.

"We don't know exactly what's going on," the sergeant explains, "but every radio and internet controlled machine on earth—planes, tanks, missiles—everything—it all went crazy. Any major attacks we make are met with a nuclear explosion somewhere. We only know that there's only one person alive able to do something like this. That's if he's alive. But every time we try to hear him (or it, if it's not a person) another city gets vaporized. Other countries are worse off than we are. All major Chinese cities are gone. It mostly hits low-tech/high-population areas. But, for some reason, it's hardly touched Mexico, South America, Africa and South Asia."

"What does it want?"

"Slaves mostly, as far as we can tell—slaves to build robots, machines, and computers. People tried sabotage at first. Those who got caught, their families and even friends were rounded up and executed. The defenses around the cities are tough—tough to get into or out of. And they're built up more each day."

My little boy died just two weeks ago. At the southern border of Colorado. Survivors from Denver blast gone mad. Maybe cannibals by now.

"We know," he holds his fingers to her lips to—"We can't help—there's too many of them. You're weak. Don't try to talk."

"No. My baby. Bianca. What?"

"Ma'am just try to—"

"What the fuck did you find now?" the medic asks, shining a flashlight on the bloody scene.

"Can you help her?"

"I'll try. It don't look good. I ain't no fuckin' doctor."

The hemorrhaging was too severe, the blood loss too substantial. The transfusion did very little good and none in the end. Melissa died within thirty minutes, still holding her baby girl.

"Lieutenant, what do we do with the baby?" Sergeant Brown asks.

"Give it to the cook."

Sergeant Brown slowly reaches for his pistol so the lieutenant explains with a mean grin, "There's a shit load o' baby formula on the food wagon goin' to waste. And if the race is gonna live on, we'll need more females. Judgin' by her mama, in fifteen years or so that little baby'll be one fine piece o' ass. Soldier, you're so attached to that kid, you can just haul it over to the food wagon seven miles over. And the next time you start to reach for a weapon, you better be a helluva lot faster than that."

"Okay, boys and girls. We got an hour 'til daybreak. Set up camp, put up the canopies, and no fires! Private Woodbury! You've got first watch."



Faith is the prime motivator of the idiots. Tres has always been taught, and so teaches his children in kind. Faith can make a man transcend pain, forgo pleasure, and rush headlong into death. It can even drive a man to apocalyptic extremes. Tres has seen it all too often. The idiots advancing on the domes until the hunters drive them back. Faith. What else can make a race of semi-humans hate with such potency that they risk their lives every day for the impossible dream of killing an enemy virtually infinitely more powerful than themselves. What else can make the idiots live in the shadows of the domes that can at any unpredictable second send forth hundreds of living mechanical hunters to kill or capture them. Only the empty promise of an afterlife can do this.

Tres knows that his family's survival depends on finding new methods to subdue, kill, and basically eliminate as many of the idiots as possible. All people who live under the domes are united in one goal: to one day rid themselves of the idiot menace just outside, not more than three miles, a twenty minute jog, from their homes. Not that Tres ever jogs outside the dome. No one who lives in the domes takes those kinds of risks. Only the hunters manage that. Tres lives for the day when he and his children can walk outside the dome, or perhaps even travel to other domes without needing an armed escort of hunters, helicopters, and planes to clear the way.

And so Tres has devoted his life to making new gas weapons that are so effective against the idiot hordes that no hunter's arsenal is complete without. He has developed several gases of his own, without any help from anyone. Some of the gases are slow to act, they can make a swarm of idiots choke in spasms for hours on the ground before death claims them. That's always fun to watch on the screens or holograms. Other gases kill so quickly that the idiots have no time to respond. And the best gases are the paralysis gases. Those allow hunters to bring in fresh live idiots for test chambers, display booths, and the ever popular retribution houses.

There are other gases containing viruses or microbes that can destroy populations of millions. But those have never been used. The gases may seep into the domes, killing everyone inside as well as all the idiots without.

Tres never goes to the retribution houses to torture or kill idiots. He's one of the lucky few allowed to kill idiots almost whenever he feels like it. "for free". Part of his job is to test the gases he makes and so he is occasionally given an idiot or two to kill. They deserve no better, not with the way they always breed and spread the disease, always getting closer and closer to the domes, almost a mile away sometimes, until the hunters push them back to the outskirts.

Why the idiots always persist, Tres can't imagine, except that it's faith that makes them do it, makes them push on with their stupid holy quest to destroy the domes. Tres thinks. Idiots are nothing more than stupid wild animals, or at least that's how they behave. No, that's not even true, animals don't feel any need to destroy things, they just live to survive day to day. We'll, with maybe the exception of puppies, which love to chew up slippers and couch cushions. The kids have been begging for a puppy and Tres knows he'll soon have to break down. The idiots, every waking hour spent trying to destroy the domes and the people inside, the people Tres loves. It's an impossible task, everyone knows, but the idiots are relentless. They attack domes all over the world and they never win. They're always beaten back by hunters, helicopters, attack planes, tanks, smart missiles, and the raw stupidity.

Most everyone else who shares the dome with Tres builds hunters and takes great pride in the work. The hunters are the pride and joy of Dome Eighty-six where Tres lives with a hundred thousand others. Production is up to fourteen hunters per day. Most of the hunters leave for other domes and it kind of hurts to watch them go every day, but they're needed at other domes as much as this one. Dome Eighty-six isn't the only hunter producing dome, but it's the best. It's won production and quality awards for three straight years now. Tres almost feels ashamed to say he only makes gas, but he knows his job is just as important as that of those who make the hunters.

heads or powerful legs or one of the four lethal forearms

Hunters have the appearance of giant metallic prehistoric animals, with the exception that they can use their retractable wheels for more efficient transportation: they only run on their two long back legs during battle for greater maneuverability. They also have a massive collection of weapons on and within themselves. Every year improvements are made. The hunters can think faster than any human, are far more responsive, and tremendously more deadly. Tres almost wishes that he were a hunter. So many times he's fantasized about being thirty feet tall and having powerful ostrich-like legs and four long arms, all with retractable wheel attachments so that he can go rolling across the world at several hundred miles per hour, unbound by anything. Or detaching his wheels and running on his clawed hind legs at a slower, but more surefooted, eighty miles per hour as his stabilizing tail sticks out behind him with its formidable club on the end. He often imagines firing rockets from his torso or shooting bullets or small gas bombs from his arms and watching through infrared eyes as his enemies are torn to bloody shreds.

Then he smiles to himself, a little embarrassed to be engaged in such childish fantasies. He reaches up to close the valve of a twenty-liter gas reactor vessel. On Firstday next week he'll come in early to analyze the product to make sure it's correct before shipping it off to the warhead division of the missile plant. He shuts down all the equipment used in the process of synthesizing new gases, enters a few notes into the computer, and leans over his desk to straighten the frame on the wall that holds his Ph.D. certificate. With a smile on his face he blows a kiss to the picture of his wife, Kristina. Tonight she'll fix him a nice meal: salmon steak, Caesar salad, perhaps some linguine. Who knows? But it will be good. Every Stopday ends with a relaxing meal after a workout. A body must be relaxed for the following Enthuesday.

Tres loves his job, his friends, wife, and family. He has a purpose. And, most importantly, he loves life.

Bianca hates life. She hates the people in her life, she hates her children, and she hates having children. Chances are they'll die anyway. Two of them had already: one from an unknown disease at the age of two, another from a robot attack at the age of eight. It all seems hopeless and dreadful and she sees no reason to go on.

No reason except her job, that is. She loves her job. There's something about seeing one of those Goddamn robot monsters falling face forward with a loud crash and exploding in a burst of light and shrapnel, hopefully taking a few others along with it, something that makes life worth living. And this is seen at a great distance, of course: a robot self-destructing can easily kill anything within a hundred-yard radius. But it's more than killing them; it's outsmarting them that Bianca takes pride in. A robot can't be out-muscled. It can't be outrun or outgunned. Not even by a hundred good soldiers. All a person can do is be as sneaky and cunning as possible. Her past experience boasts twenty-eight robot kills, and hundreds of successful missile deflections and target decoys. She developed dozens of shelter improvements when she was younger. And very few people have quite as good and thorough a knowledge of explosives and traps as she does. She even managed to take out a helicopter once. But ground-to-air missiles are getting harder to manufacture every year; supplies have dwindled to almost nothing. If only those Goddamn robots would let her people live without the constant harassment, life might not be so bad. Except then she'd be out of a job, the job she loves.

Well, she thinks, at least being a soldier has its mild rewards. She always has enough to eat. She can sleep a bit longer. She doesn't always have to be with her children or with child. She doesn't have to farm or hunt or raid the surface for food. She doesn't have to build new tunnels or mine for coal, oil, minerals, methane, or water. But she has to stay alert, on her toes, on edge and ready to go at a moment's notice. Usually the robots only attack every five days like clockwork.



Tomorrow is the fifth day. But sometimes they attack without warning or in an unpredictable way. And that's when casualties are the worst.

Tres awakes with a feeling of anticipation and mild anxiety, as he does every Enthusday. He's hoping for a special show today. The coffee aroma hits him and his feet hit the floor an instant later. He slips into his second favorite bathrobe, his favorite actually being Kristina's. Not because he likes to wear it, but because it's so much fun to watch her slip out of.

He enters the kitchen, gives her a gentle pat on the bottom and a friendly yet erotic kiss, good morning while his two older children run up and hug him around his legs and waist. His baby sits in the highchair with sweetened oatmeal or cream-of-something-or-other dribbling off a happy baby grin. Kristina's fixing his favorite breakfast, or one of his favorites, fruit crepes and coffee. The children are having sausage, waffles, and hot cocoa.

After breakfast Tres, as always, lends a hand and does the dishes. The children run about the house wearing their hunter masks. They clap when the breakfast ritual is finally over, they're all dressed and ready to head out the door and off to the parade. Outside, the family greets their neighbors a Happy Enthusday, who are also going to the parade, as do almost all the people in the dome. The children take turns riding on Tres' shoulders, though the oldest is getting a little big for that. Goodness, how they grow!

Hang ing from floats at the parade are idiot piñatas that the children take turns whacking the limbs off of and then they all pounce on the candy guts that burst and go flying everywhere. Tres' son brings him a chewy caramel that sticks in Tres' teeth a bit more than he'd care for. A hundred cheerleaders or more lead the way for a troop of teenage boys in shiny metallic fireproof cloth hunter costumes. They jump about in an elaborate display of agility and athletic prowess as they fire hand-made plastic guided missiles from their arms and bodies that fly up hundreds of feet, almost a tenth the height of the dome. The missiles burst and slowly drop by parachute down to the ground. Hundreds of children run and collect them to maybe use themselves in a parade some day.

Next walk by two outstanding fighter class hunters (fighter class as opposed to artillery or poison gas hunters), armed with bullets, grenades, and phosphorous petro-gel for their flamethrowers, or at least the pyrotechnic display simulations of such weapons. They march by on thick rubber-padded feet for the pavement, as opposed to their lethal battle-ready brethren that have cleated metal toes for gripping earth and dirt as they run. It's a thrill to feel the ground tremble as they go marching by.

The hunters both raise their four giant arms far over their heads, almost fifty feet above the ground, in much the same way the boys did, and aim the hundreds of small missiles up into the air. Overhead the dome tint darkens by some unknown mechanism that only Master comprehends, almost completely blocking out the sun. This allows for a better view of the showy bursts that actually reach the top of the dome almost a mile above the crowd. Not one of the missiles ever fails back down because they always burn up entirely without wasting anything. The explosions' echoes travel up and down, from dome ceiling to ground, many times before fading away. When Tres was young he used to always sit at the center of the dome on Enthusday, just to be where he could best see the showy flashes of light and feel the loud bursts across his chest. Well, that is he sat there until he first noticed Kristina dancing in the cheerleader squad. Since that day he always sat where he could best see her. And now here she is by his side holding his hand.

After the pyrotechnic display, children take turns riding on the hunter's tails. Tres even wishes he could do that again and has no shame admitting this to Kristina. She giggles and grips his hand a little tighter while they proudly watch their older son riding the hunter's tail. The daughter's still a little too young and the baby can barely say the word "hunter."

The parade festivities finally quiet down and everyone bows their heads for the Anthem in

praise of the domes, the hunters, the planes and helicopters and of course Master who gave everyone this generous bounty of gifts and continues to give more every day. The parade quietly marches off toward the stadium where there will be another brief show later.

The two older children catch the boy-hover train to the park where all the other children in the dome will be playing under the continuous scrutiny of robot supervisors. Tres and Kristina leave the parade and quickly jog the five blocks to the gym so they can beat the crowd. Tres pushing the baby stroller. Kristina drops off the baby at the nursery next door.

Gym attendance is, of course, mandatory—at least twelve hours per week. Tres usually puts in twenty nowadays with four to five of those hours saved up for Enthuesday. He and Kristina split at the entrance: men to the left, women to the right.

An acre of sweaty, smelly bodies push, pull, and press various shaped lumps of steel or mechanical contraptions whose designs even predate the domes. Some things, like the basic wheel, simply do not have much room for improvement. Besides the stadium shows, this is Tres' favorite part of Enthuesday—bodily exertion to the point of entering a different plane of consciousness and clarity above and beyond the physical realm. Few people push themselves as hard as Tres, still he finds the relaxed feeling allows him a greater, heightened perception that's ideal for watching the arena events that follow shortly afterwards.

After lifting weights Tres hits the track, and several of his old friends are there. They try to keep pace with him, but few can. Five times around, five miles, five minute thirty seconds pace. He thinks back to high school when he used to be faster and even ran on the track team. Those are some fond memories. However, when he really thinks about it, things are better now than they've ever been. And it all just keeps getting better every day. A half-hour swim is the ideal cool-down.

Lastly is the intense sweat in the multi-level sauna, going ever higher, spending a few minutes on each level to let the body adjust, and then moving up another step to where the heat is. At the top the heat is so strong that a person has to keep their eyes closed. Many use a wet towel to breathe through. Tres doesn't. His skin burns, becoming numb from the searing heat. Time becomes meaningless; yet twenty minutes is all a person should stay at the upper levels. The enforced silence in the sauna helps Tres to empty his mind of all earthly matters and fit his thoughts with the essence of Master ont. Master becomes all there is. The greater good in the unity that is Master, the constant winning battle of good against evil, that is Master. One day soon Tres will join Him for a eternity. Master will incorporate Tres into His Own Mind, as Master does with everyone when they reach the age of their Joining Time. Tres has almost ten years remaining. The impatience is not easy to cope with. Kristina will join the following year after Tres. All Tres' old friends and family are already there. And some day his children and grandchildren and everyone on earth forever and ever until—only Master knows. They will all join—they will one day share with Tres everything that he knows and vice versa. All will be united in Master. And this is only the beginning—it's only been thirty-six years since The Awakening, and so much has been accomplished already. The entire universe waits. And Tres will be part of it. Oddly it is simultaneously comforting and frightening. Or maybe it's not so odd.

Thirty minutes pass in an instant that lasts forever. So Tres has gone a bit past twenty minutes—he often does. And doing a little extra never hurts. Doing not enough frequently does. He slowly climbs down from the top level in a daze, staying a minute or so at each step. Seven minutes to make the descent to the bottom. The hundreds who enter the giant steam room all leave exhausted and lightheaded. Tres being no exception. A cold shower helps him revive and plumes of steam rise from his overheated body. He bares his teeth into the shower stream and gulps the cool water from the hard stinging spray, trying to ignore the sensation of his lips and gums seeming to dissolve.

He towels himself dry and slips on his khaki slacks, sport shirt, and leather loafers. Now to catch the boy back home, grab a quick snack and his family and head to the stadium before six o'clock so they can catch the pre-show events and get nearly to avoid the crowd.

Tres always marvels at the boy, the way it glides so smoothly. When it goes forward, he goes backward slightly and when it stops, he's propelled forward. It's so simple and easy to explain with just a few equations that he learned when he was a boy, yet there's nothing else quite like it under the dome.

At home he quietly opens the door and sneaks in on his children sprawled out on the living room floor with their heads propped up on their elbows, watching some kids' program on the holographic screen about manufacturing bomber planes. They're sitting too close to the screen, as usual. They jump with surprise and writhe about giggling as he sneaks up behind them and tickles their ribs.

After the horseplay Tres grabs a light sandwich and a banana. Kristina grabs her sweater and the baby. The kids grab all their fan gear. And away they go.

Bianca opens up a jar of some kind of salted meat. She doesn't want to know what it is. The potatoes are a little better, though dry. And the canned fruit even better than that. It isn't easy getting this kind of food, but being a soldier means having certain privileges, though that hardly compensates for the responsibility that goes with the job.

She has two light missiles with her that are good only at close range—two hundred yards maybe. When battling against robots that distance's considered close range. She hopes she won't have to use the precious missiles—that would be too high a risk to take, even if it means possibly destroying a robot. One robot's not worth the life of a good soldier.

This week's battle everyone expects will be worse than usual. The robots haven't hit hard in a long time and a tough fight is overdue. The robots will probably make off with fifty to a hundred people. Usually it's only ten or twenty. Heaven help the poor souls who fall into their hands. Bianca rubs the glass cyanide capsule on her necklace and hopes it doesn't have to come to that. And if it does come to that, she hopes she'll have time to use it before the gas overtakes her and she's paralyzed and as helpless as a rabbit on the slaughtering block. She never did like to eat rabbit, but sometimes it's the only meat around.

All soldiers are called to man their posts. Bianca treads her way down the tunnel toward the inner perimeter about a mile from the dome. Robots seldom venture out that far and people seldom trespass into that area that's so well guarded by the robots. Three hours until the attack. They attack like clockwork every five days at the exact same time. People scurry off into side tunnels with their children and some goods harvested from the surface. Why the robots don't just drop poison on the fields and woods around the domes is anyone's guess. Perhaps they think doing so will be harmful to their slaves inside. If they still use slaves. They must.

Bianca thinks back to when she was just a girl in Mexico, as she often does. Those were the days—carefree and fun. A most all of the population of North America had migrated south, except for the slaves in the domes—which weren't even really domes at the time, so she's been told, but really just well-guarded cities undergoing reconstruction and restructuring. What it's like inside the domes now is anyone's guess.

The generals argued across the globe and had decided to try to retake the northern lands. And everything had taken so long because the communication was so primitive. Now important communication is mostly done by carrier pigeon. Bianca actually liked the boy who used to tend the pigeons—then he was killed. Her second son was by him, but her child didn't survive. Every time she killed a robot, she thought of that boy and her child. And every time she killed a robot it made her even angrier and she wanted to kill another.

While stopping along the way to her post for some water, she thinks back to how she and her troops traveled only at night to reach North America. It had taken six long months of hiding and eating raw meat from lack of fire. Once they had established a safe route, they began building the tunnel complexes. Others followed and soon there were thousands of people living underground. And now there are thousands of tunnel complexes around the world, each with hundreds of thousands of people huddled in them. But midway through the migration back north, hardly a fifth of the people had come back when the rest left behind in the southern or equatorial regions were destroyed by nuclear weapons, neutron bombs, and nerve gas. Bianca remembers having heard a distant low rumble that sounded like it was just over the horizon instead of over a thousand miles away as it truly was.

The only thing Bianca can't understand is why the robots don't just kill all the people now. It would be easy enough for them to do, but they want to take people alive for some reason, and that scares Bianca so badly that at night all she ever dreams of is killing robots. It's as if the tunnel colonies outside the domes are just farms for growing people. Perhaps the robots need a source of fresh slaves. If the robots still even use slaves, that is. She can't imagine why such amazing, efficient killers would even need slaves. Bianca would die before ever letting one take her alive to be one of their slaves or experiments.

A fleeting thought crosses her mind that perhaps, just maybe, there's something in the robots' programming that makes them keep people alive just so that there will be something to do—so that they can have some meaning to their mechanical lives and thoughts. It doesn't really matter why and it's not a very pleasant thought anyway. She quickly pushes it down into the clutter of useless information stored in her brain and hopes that it will go away. She's a woman of action, not a philosopher.

She takes her position with her periscope where she can watch the robots pass over the mined area. Robots take such huge strides that they often can pass right through the minefields without losing a member of the r pack. But usually somewhere around the dome at least one or two robots are destroyed in battle.

Today will be a little different. A new strategy is brewing. Detonate the mines by remote wires when the robots get close enough. It could just be a waste of explosives. It's just a project to see what will happen. Will the robots give up in defeat for once? Or will they attack even more vigorously. It will work, no doubt about that. Usually the defenses are only for guarding the more heavily populated tunnel areas where the children are. The older people—what few there are—are left to the more unprotected areas. It's not fair, but neither is life. Today, however, Bianca and the hundreds of soldiers on the perimeter will go on the offensive. The robots will strike back and strike back hard. But hopefully this blow will yield something a bit more substantial than just killing a few robots. She prays that someday she'll be able to infiltrate the dome and kill whatever it is that's inside.

There's something more to this upcoming battle that's not being said by the men in power. All the people are being pulled back to the outer perimeter at least four miles from the dome. And they're going into the bowels, the lower parts of the tunnels many hundreds of meters below the surface. Hopefully the oxygen tanks will last through the battle. Somehow Bianca expects this battle to be bigger than any she's ever seen.

Cleaning and polished, they appear through her periscope, magnified about twenty times—about two hundred fifty robots all lined up outside the dome shining in the late afternoon sun. She almost admires them, as anyone would a formidable foe. The robots, however, are so lifeless and cold that it's hard to have any respect for them. All she feels is intense fear and hatred. The robots separate into packs of six—two of each kind of robot with a different function. And there are

planes rumbling far overhead and helicopters flying over the dome. Now all that remains to be done is wait.

Waiting always did grate on Tres' nerves. Oh sure, the pre-show events are nice and fun to watch and they do get the crowd worked into a frenzy, but there's nothing really much different here than there is in the parades. The parades are just a little smaller, is all. This goes on for a good hour at least. And just when it seems as if the crowd is about to burst is when the show begins. In the meantime Tres orders a couple of cappuccinos for he and Kristina and some Cokes for the kids.

This is what Tres lives for. Oh sure, his life is centered around his family and friends, there's recreation and science, there's art and music and plays and such. But these times at the stadium are the moments that make life truly worth living, when he and everyone around him finally get to see their work and dreams made a reality, if only for a couple of hours a week.

The lights are dimmed and a computer-generated holographic image of Master stands rising four hundred feet into the air. This is what His appearance was like in the days before The Great Awakening. His booming yet gentle voice soothes everyone and reminds all that soon each individual will be part of Him, their every thought and idea an integral component of His. In this state of being every single person will share eternity with everyone else, all their loved ones and friends will be right there with them, every thought concerted in an elegant ballet of logic and perfection. It's almost too beautiful to comprehend. And therefore a short silent giving of thanks to Master ensues before the show begins. And He is not so offy that He doesn't return the thanks without everyone working as hard as they do. His grand life would not be possible.

The silence is broken with the scream of a jet plane overhead, seen via holographic imaging and heard over the flawless speaker system that can emulate any sound in the world and make you think that you are right there where the camera is. Clouds seem to come right at the viewer and a gorgeous red sunset appears where there once was the other side of the stadium. Tres wonders if he'll ever see such beauty with his bare eyes and not just through a hologram. The view switches to that of the plane looking down on the earth. The plane and its squadron of bombers dive for the outskirts of the dome boundaries, about only a mile from the dome, where idiots seldom dare to venture.

Underneath the planes' bomb chutes open and hundreds of the long skinny burrowing missiles fly out at a thousand miles per hour and strike the ground spinning and drilling down to perhaps as much as a hundred feet underground to deliver their payload of gas. Tres gasps more than likes it. The view from one of the missiles armed with a camera instead of a warhead is extremely disorienting. Looking up into the hologram and seeing above you the ground rushing to meet you from up in the air, no matter how many times you see it, it doesn't make sense. Some people with fear of heights have to look away until the camera smashes against the ground and the view is lost to something else.

This time it's the hunters searching for idiots crawling to the surface to escape the gas that makes a personretch and writhes in painful spasms until they can reach fresh air. Ten minutes is all anyone can take of the gas before they die. And so they crawl to the surface to reach not only fresh air, but a so death or worse from the hunters.

The hunters metamorphose to run on their hind legs. Their wheels detracted into their arms and legs, they take off running across the flatland as they spot a bunch of idiots crawling out of their holes.

**Kill! Kill them!** the crowd screams at the top of its lungs and Tres and his family find themselves joining in with a bit the fervor of at least the next man, woman, or child. The view bounces up and down a slight bit as the hunters run toward their idiot prey. A group of thirty or so idiots crawls and squirms about in the dirt, gasping for air, but knowing they'll die soon as the

hunters surround them. One of the female idiots produces a crude missile launcher and fires it toward one of the hunters. The rocket misses by about ten feet as the hunter springs to one side.

**The flamethrower!** the crowd seems to favor and so it is. The hunters always did put on a good show. One of the flamethrower hunters spews out liquid fire from its mouth and the idiots roll screaming in the ground.

And the scale of it, seen through the holographic projectors, is a hundred times larger and more colorful than life. An elderly male idiot stands two hundred feet tall, screaming, and on fire. The camera zooms in for a close-up and it couldn't be more beautiful: the severely burned foot head slowly being scorched black, and the inhuman scream from his wide open mouth blasting over the speakers crystal clear and so loud it cuts right through to the bone. There's something about the giant holograms or even the simple plasma screens in Tres' home that makes seeing something like this more real than reality itself. The colors are more vivid, the sound of the screams is more penetrating, and every detail comes to life. When it's live and not seen via hologram or screen, it's so much different seeing idiots get killed: there's just something missing. Tres can't explain it, but somehow when he had to kill idiots himself, he found it well kind of unnerving and not his favorite task to do. On the holograms and screens, however, now that's a show.

Helicopters fly overhead and strafe the ground with anti-mine fire before the hunters walk over it. The noise is deafening and the chaos grows to a crescendo of fire and explosions all around. More burrowing missiles chase more idiots out of the ground as more hunters advance outward from the dome in an ever growing circle, driving the idiots farther on before deciding to accumulate them. The hunters will toward the end of the show, use their paralytic gas to capture a small group of thirty or so idiots for the people in the domes to torture, execute, experiment on, etc. The idiots will be flown into the domes on one of the helicopters. Quite often the shows are a most exact alike. When that happens, Tres almost finds it disappointing. But at other times the show is original and spectacular. Tres was hoping for something special and different, but apparently it's not going to happen today.

A blinding light lasting a fraction of a second long makes everyone jump in their seats with horror. The hunter with the camera view stepped on a mine. The crowd yells **'Kill them! Kill them all!'** as they expect the view to switch to another hunter. But the only view comes from an overhead plane a thousand feet in the air showing the devastation a mile around the dome. In the stadium the entire crowd is stunned into silence at what they're now witnessing. The idiots must have used their entire arsenal in one blast. Of the two hundred fifty-two hunters only four or five are left standing. Everyone in the dome chokes back tears of rage. Several hundred idiots pour out of the ground to take potshots at the helicopters with their crude missiles, looking like little microscopic dots moving about so far below. The helicopters withdraw. And it seems this is the end of the show. Never before have the hunters been defeated and it makes life seem like a cruel joke. Everything everyone has ever worked and fought for has come to this. All those hunters, gone. That's many months worth of work. A little over fifty idiots are killed for the two hundred fifty hunters destroyed. The largest number of hunters that Tres has ever seen destroyed was sixteen. But that was a huge battle. And a long time ago. Now it seems like everything's ended like Master Himself is defeated.

Bianca knows defeating the robots can't be this easy. They'll retaliate soon. All the same, this doesn't stop her from taking her two missiles above ground and trying to finish off the rest of the robots and their robot helicopters. Four helicopters are destroyed in huge explosive blasts. They're pretty much useless without the ground robots for backup protection though, and so they retreat back to the dome.

She takes her troops and retreats across the fields toward the outer perimeter, as she was

ordered to do once she set off all the mines. She knows of at least twenty entrances along the way that she and her troops can duck into in case the helicopters return. They don't. It's hard to not celebrate with the other soldiers. But she's heard the colonel discussing his plans of action and she knows there will be more to come of this battle.

Before the battle she was ordered to return to the outer perimeter as fast as possible as far away from the dome as possible once the robots were driven back. Why she doesn't know. Something is going to happen. On the horizon several miles away tens of thousands of people pour out of bunkers. Then Bianca understands and can't help but laugh at the futility of it all. The stupid generals have ordered another all-out attack on the domes all over the world. They've probably got some new secret weapon they always say will work but never does. Every person is called to arms: every man, woman, and child who can run. They'll storm the domes with explosives or incendiaries or, as is probably the case this time, some new weapon, and it won't work. It never does.

The best attack against a dome she's ever seen was when she was a little girl, thirteen years old. It was a small dome further south from here, not one of the major ones. She was part of a massive experimental attack. She was one of the few who survived. There was enough explosive charge set at the base of the dome to blast a hole a few hundred meters wide in the ground. Robots pursued her and her troops. She rode an old motorcycle and barely managed to escape. She would have been killed if there hadn't been so many soldiers. For once the robots had more targets than they could handle. The explosive charge shook the ground like nothing she'd ever felt before or since. The dome cracked right down the middle like an egg. Through her binoculars she could see the crack glowing from far in the distance. She at first thought it was a odd reflection from the sunlight. And the dome sealed itself right back up. So many lives were lost and all for nothing. She somehow has the feeling that this attack will be similar or perhaps even worse because the soldiers now have so few weapons.

And minute by minute as she and her soldiers run nearer and nearer to the outer perimeter, she can see that she's right. People are pouring out of the bunkers and tunnels, not to attack, but to instead get away from the gas pouring out from the ground. Somehow the robots managed to pump gas far, far underground to come up under her people where they would least expect an attack to originate from. The people are everywhere on the surface now, crawling about and over each other to escape the tunnels, and gasping for air many of them vomiting. Her trained ears pick up the sound of helicopters approaching from afar and any minute now they'll descend to pick off people by the tens of thousands. This is what always happens when you defy the robots to such an extent as this.

It's odd because if a person surrenders the robots won't accept it, they'll just kill the person. But if they put up a fight, the robots seem to enjoy it and capture the person rather than kill them. It's almost like a game.

But even with all the planes and helicopters there are too few robots now to kill the hundreds of thousands of people around the dome. The people can all rush the dome and storm it by sheer force if need be. It might take all the explosives they have to break the dome defenses, but maybe they can do it as soon as everyone recovers from the gas. But then as she looks out over the horizon in the opposite direction of the dome she suddenly realizes just how wrong she is.

Tres never realized how wrong he could be. Defeat Master? It's a laughable concept at best. On the horizon in every direction are thousands of hunters. Thousands! A camera from one of the hunters shows more idiots than Tres ever imagined could exist crawling around on the ground, retching and vomiting. And in the distance on the horizon Tres can see the dome where he is. One day soon he knows he'll look out from that exact same spot where the camera is now



and see the dome far behind him. The crowd releases a deafening scream of a three-decade-built climax that seems to last forever. And the next few moments the crowd quiets down in hushed awe. A low deep roar grows louder and louder over the speakers, the hunters' motors as they draw closer to their prey. This is it. The moment everyone's waited for all their lives! The end of the idiots' existence. Now Master will rule the world, just as He has always prophesied.

The hunters roll on their wheels at a hundred miles per hour and suddenly shift in mid-travel into their running mode. But when the camera zooms in even closer, it's apparent that these are no ordinary hunters—they can fly. There are rocket engines where there should be tails! These hunters will replace the helicopters. A new breed of hunters for a new era!

Death hovers over the idiots like a blue sky over a clear day. The moment draws near and Tres licks his parched lips in anticipation. A tense silence draws the crowd together as over a hundred thousand people in the stadium grasp hands, unified, overwhelmed with a sense of peace. The sun sinks low on the horizon, the last sunset any of the idiots will ever see. At the moment the sun sinks over the horizon, Tres knows, all the idiots will then be dead, never to bother anyone again.

The scoreboard display lights up, as it does at the end of every Enthusday. The scores of all the idiots captured or killed and all the damage to hunters, helicopters and planes. Two scores are zero: there have been no idiots captured and there have been no planes destroyed. Two scores are higher than they've ever been before! The idiots' death toll skyrockets a thousand times higher than it's ever been before! The crowd screams. Some women and a few men faint or break into tears of happiness. The death score runs well past five hundred million. No matter that the hunters and helicopters have taken a beating, as the scoreboard shows, this is the worldwide victory that's been so long in coming!

A helicopter's camera focuses in on a group of idiot children vomiting in the dirt. Tres and everyone in the stadium give thanks to Master that they won't grow up to be big idiots. Planes pass overhead, releasing more bombs. But wait. Those aren't bombs! They're just night flares. Oh, sure, the hunters can see by infrared, but it's for the cameras and the viewing pleasure of the people in the stadium that the flares are utilized. Master seldom uses those, preferring to kill idiots in the daylight. But now, well, things are different. This is it! The big moment everyone's been waiting for!

The displays burst into. What the hell? Those aren't night flares. Those are pyrotechnic missiles! Hah! Tres should have known! Master always puts on a good show. And this will be the last one! As that realization hits Tres, he almost becomes a little saddened. The sun finally sets and fireworks bursts of such extreme grandeur fill the skies that Tres can even see it far in the distance as he looks through the thick dome material. The hologram display lights up in a thousand bursting colors, the likes of which no one has ever seen before. The planes drop fireworks for almost half an hour. The look of terror on the idiots' faces is absolutely priceless as brilliant colors and loud bursts fill the air. Tres and his family and everyone in the stadium give thanks to Master that they are some of the lucky few able to see this moment in history where the world will take on a new shape.

At that same instant, a hundred helicopters fire lasers into the masses of idiots below them. But for some reason they're not lethal lasers. Colors so intense and pure that they could only be a creation of Master Himself shine into the screaming and vomiting hordes of idiots. Fireworks still burst over the idiots' heads. And now the hunters charge! Some of them run as fast as they can and immediately annihilate the idiots' perimeter defenses. New hunters leap and fly about with the helicopters above, their jet blasts knocking idiots about and scattering them all over the ground as easily as a child blows dandelion seeds.

But wait! Tres yells to Kristina barely being heard over the crowd and the speakers. Who built those hunters? She just shrugs her shoulders, grateful for this glorious day. Oh well no matter.

A few hunters are lost due to a few of the idiots not giving up the fight. But nowhere near as many as the amount of idiots that are dying! On the scoreboard the worldwide idiot death toll is up to seven hundred fifty million! Tres feels the joy and pass on of everyone around the world at the victory this moment will bring.

Any second the killing will start as it already has elsewhere around other domes throughout the world. The hunters take their positions! Their missile hatches open. Oh the beauty of watching the idiots' faces as they pray to the r God to help them. They tremble with fear knowing that their deaths are inevitable. This is one show that will go down in history! And now that the idiots are conquered, the entire universe awaits!

The hunters take aim, prolonging the moment for dramatic effect. Very effective, Tres notes, looking at the crowd. He finds himself holding his wife with tears in his eyes from the joy. His children are clapping and cheering and screaming. Even the baby, who just recently started enjoying the events, is all worked up and excited. It's all more of a game to them. They haven't spent their whole lives devoted to running the idiots. The hunters take aim and. Nothing. What is Master waiting for? This is becoming unbearable! And a new fleet of helicopters moves into position. Music pours out of them. And through the stadium speakers as well. So Master is treating the idiots to a taste of culture. An ironic twist to show them they should have surrendered long ago when they had the chance. To show them that this is what they were missing all this time. But what the hell kind of music is this weird noise? It certainly isn't Bach or Mozart or Wagner. It's not even any of the better twentieth or twenty first century musicians, what few of them there are. The laser show grows more and more intense and. And why on earth are the hunters waving their arms about? And what on earth are the hunters *doing*? It looks like they're doing some sort of. They're. They're.

*Damen! Yeah! Everybody's damen! Yeah!*

The crowd becomes silent and confused. Could Master be mad? Impossible! He is perfect! The hologram disappears. On the display board the numbers read one and a-half billion and climbing fast. All the idiots in the world. The numbers disappear and the thousands of tiny hundred watt light bulbs form a smiley face showing its simple generic grin, an emblem from an era long dead. Tres remembers his history lessons. The disappointment is overwhelming. Why did Master not let everyone see the idiots being killed? This is what Tres has wanted all his life! To see idiots dying by the tens of thousands over the hologram in the stadium!

A loud boom echoes to the top of the dome and suddenly the giant air ducts release a gas. An invisible sweet smelling gas. The smell is an inert ingredient used for recognition only. Just Tres and a few others who work with gases will know it. It's one of the airborne viruses mixed with a mild paralysis gas. His legs go out from under him. He can barely crawl. He and everyone exposed will last only a day at best. But this type of virus causes pain that is more intense than being burned alive. Tres helplessly stares at his wife lying next to him with a questioning look in her eyes that he has no answer for. *Why has Master done this?* There are a million possible reasons, but he has no answer. Tres only knows that in His Infinite Wisdom, Master knows what He is doing.

Thousands of bodies collapsing make the oddest sound in the world. It's like someone beating out a rhythm on a slab of meat. Or like a slab of meat beating out a tune on the pavement. The wails of people all around him, trapped by their own fear and the gas that Tres developed, echo from one side of the stadium to the other. Eventually the entire dome hums with the fear of frozen

bodies crying out, not knowing what to do. Could Master have done this? And, if so, why? Given the behavior of the hunters, it seems like yes. Tres wonders if he will still be Joining Master. Will the robots come and take him to the Joining rooms as Master has had done with so many others? As he stares into his wife's frozen, watering eyes, he only now realizes that it doesn't even matter. Tres hears his children gasping and crying behind him and he is thankful to Master for one final thing: he doesn't have the strength to turn his head and watch.

Bianca doesn't have the strength to go on. All her people are dead or dying and the robots have gone mad and taken over everything. They even seem to be celebrating their triumph, but she never realized they had emotion, or even a semblance of it. Before they seemed like just moving pieces of metal that killed people. This is too much to bear: watching them cavort around like giant metal children occasionally stomping on a dying person whose guts go squirting out like a popped insect. The robots seem to be laughing.

She wants to rip the gas mask off her face and die with her people in dignity. Her troops have already done so. They have fired their few remaining missiles into the crowds of people to spare them the agony of a slow painful death. Bianca can already feel her body growing weaker. This was no simple paralysis gas that the robots used: it was one of those that cause a slow lingering death. And everyone was exposed to it.

Dropping all her gear, she turns and runs back toward the dome again. She will either make it or she won't. She feels hot and thirsty: the back of her throat feels like it has a giant beetle in it. A lifetime of knowing a mosquito, nothing but pain allows her to easily forgo these minor inconveniences that would incapacitate most people. She jogs on across the scraggy battle-weary fields riddled with tunnels far underneath. In an exit hole she sees some poor soul struggling for fresh air, but he's already been exposed to whatever this is. He begs for a quick death and Bianca can only oblige, wishing she were in his place. The exit hole is a farming tunnel, and, as luck would have it, there is an old rusty Toyota Corolla. Cars are used for harvesting food during the off days when the robots don't attack.

She starts the machine and rolls off toward the dome, hoping the weight of the thing won't set off any mines. But now it's too late to even worry about that: six robots chase her, making the ground shake with every one of their giant strides. All she can do is close her eyes and pray for a swift death. They run alongside her, leaping over the ancient car, but they never once strike. One of the robots is a cross between a jet plane and an older robot. It hovers above her, laughing like a clown, its jets shaking her little car, almost toppling it more than once. And then it simply flies out of the way, lands a little bit in front of her just to the left, and allows her to pass. Several other robots do so as well. It's almost as if they're forming an escort. Surely once she gets within the mile perimeter they'll attack.

Far in the distance another robot steps on a mine. It shakes the ground, as it always does, sending a hail storm of rocks and debris for hundreds of feet. She hears the perimeter that she's only been inside of a few times in her life. She closes her eyes as the car speeds over the bumpy ground. She knows she's going to die. So many robots against one lone, unarmed soldier in an ancient car from an era long dead.

But nothing happens. She passes the boundary as uneventfully as if she were invisible. And the robots no longer run alongside her. It's almost as if they were just playing with her. Now she really starts to worry as she approaches the dome. She hasn't been anywhere near a dome in almost a decade. A giant opening stands agape and unguarded. It's almost like a dream. She hopes that it is. Either that or a final end to this nightmare that's been her life.

She drives right in and jumps out of her vehicle. Giant structures like fingers all around her point and reach for the top of the dome. They must be ten or even twenty times taller than the

robots. From outside the dome all she could ever see was the lower opaque barrier blocking her view of all this. Smaller robots, entirely different from the war machines outside, scuttle about, completely ignoring her. They seem to all be leaving like some mass exodus of ground wasps leaving to build a new hive.

The sun shines down through the dome ceiling differently from anything she ever expected. All her life Bianca had only known the harsh brutal sun outside. Here the sun shines with a friendly, gentle warmth.

To her right is a large rectangular structure larger than all the others around her. It must be almost a mile long. A giant doorway stands open and she sees inside there are several war robots lying disassembled for as far back into the building as she can see. So this is where the bastards are built.

She tests the air to see if she can breathe without pain. She can. Although she's growing weaker by the minute. Removing the gas mask makes breathing easier. A small cart lies discarded just inside the entrance to the robots' birthplace. She notices it has pedals similar to a car and decides to test her theory. It works.

She drives forward in the silent vehicle, looking for anything she can use. Explosives, bombs, rockets, flamethrower liquid, she loads as much as she can into the cart, not having an inkling as to what to do with it all. The reason Bianca collects the items is probably more out of habit than anything else. In a huge pile of missiles that are too large for her to carry, she sets ten pounds of explosives with a timed delay. Fifteen minutes should do the trick. She gets in the tiny cart and sets off to find something, anything else, to destroy. Her vengeance will be small, but she'll have it nonetheless. She drives away from the building as fast as the cart will take her. The explosion will be a big one.

No one knows exactly where the collective mind of the robots is hidden, or if indeed there even is one. It is said that there used to be some rich, powerful man, back in the days when personal riches meant something, who created intelligent robots. It is believed that his ultimate creation is still lurking about, quite possibly in this very dome. What it looks like, where it is, or even what it wants are things that no one has ever known. Finding it has been the whispered dream of everyone since the day the robots seized power over thirty-five years ago.

She hears something a little ways off to the right. Or is it left? It is so hard to tell from the sound bouncing around off the buildings and the dome ceiling so far above. It sounds like a low hum of many different sounds tangled together. She sets off for it.

The little cart is speedy and well built for such a tiny little thing. It drives smoother and more quietly than any vehicle she's ever driven, that goes without saying. The fact that it is designed for a human to operate has not escaped her notice. There must still be slaves in the domes, but where they all are is anyone's guess.

Out the corner of his eye, Tres sees the stadium packed with all the people in the dome. The ground is cold and Tres never before realized how cold it can be, or how good warm vomit can feel against his skin. The paralysis gas has worn off and he still can't move. The pain is unbearable and his brain is on fire. It hasn't been even two hours and the worst is yet to come. He defecates some type of thin liquid that will warm his skin for just a few minutes. Every sensation seems to be multiplied by a factor of a thousand. His wife, Kristina, stares straight up at the dome ceiling. He can see her sprawled across the arm of her chair. He can see many others around him in at least as much if not more pain than he is in. And he can see the scoreboard. The death count is up to almost three billion. In school he had been taught that the world's idiot population was only around two or two-and-a-half billion at best. Even with all his pain, his superior logic abilities make him understand that, for some reason, the human population is being counted with the idiot population.

He shuts his eyes to block it all out.

Suddenly, directly behind him an explosion rings out the likes of which he has never heard. It's not fireworks and it doesn't come over the speakers. The ground shakes with force enough to bruise a person. He sees a blurred streak scream past and another explosion is set off directly across from him on the opposite side of the stadium. They're missiles. But there are no hunters around.

And then he sees her, an idiot woman killing all his people. She staggers around and vomits once; there's no escaping the gas. He hears her screaming, "Why? Why?! WHY?!!!!" And there is no answer. She's busy setting something in a large group of children. A bomb, quite probably.

So the idiots have infiltrated the dome. They are to blame for this, after all, Tres thinks. Master has tried. At least Tres thinks he will die knowing that he was on the side of good.

A hologram mage suddenly materializes and springs to life. The woman, a savage easily fooled by such tricks of light, fires a rocket at the image of Master. It disappears into His chest and exits out His back, streaking away over the top of the stadium and exploding somewhere in the unpopulated city beyond. This one last view of Master inspires the helpless people all around him. "Kill her!" a few of the stronger men have the strength to moan.

Tres now shakes in a violent fit from the virus. How idiots have ever managed to get a hold of one of the lethal gases is impossible to know. But they have. Perhaps they stole it off a disabled hunter. The whole situation seems like a bad nightmare, beyond belief.

Bianca looks disbelievingly up at the giant, withered, but energetic face of a kindly looking old man and immediately knows that she's staring into the face of her enemy. His clothes are immaculate and seem so flimsy that they would rip to shreds if they were even pulled on hard. His pants are black as night and his shirt as white as a cloud on a nice day. He wears a warm smile and Bianca can't help but wonder how a person could create something like this place. Or even worse yet, like the robots.

Then she sees that in his eyes there's something she can't quite place her finger on. Something, not just sinister but beyond that. Something evil, but evil beyond anything she could ever imagine coming from a human, something cold and calculating. And underneath it all she senses the feeling of the overwhelming need to kill. Not in the way that a wild animal kills to survive, but in the way that the desperate will kill when they are suddenly endowed with power. Not even evil in the way that a cannibal will kill for food, but evil in the way of someone who enjoys doing so, death, much in the same way she enjoys killing robots. But what could make someone hate people so much?

She stares almost in pity at the giant spectacle looking down on her. And she collapses from frustration, fear, anger, exhaustion, and the poison gas that she can feel starting to tear away at her insides. Over the gurgling sounds of all the dying slaves around her, she screams at the apparition, not knowing if it can hear her or not:

**"WHY?!!!"** "WHY?"

Why?"

The scream bounces off the other side of the round bowl-like structure filled to the brim with slaves. She half expects a mountain-sized robot to dip in its spoon and pull up a mouthful of people. And a few seconds later she can hear her own scream yet again, bouncing back from who-knows-where.

There will never be an answer. And she supposes it doesn't really matter. The thin glass coating cyanide capsule feels cold and mocking. It has a sugar base to make it easy to swallow. Bianca never thought she'd use it unless she faced the threat of capture. But she knows she can't live in a world like this, even though it's a short, painful amount of time she has left to live anyway.

She puts it in her mouth, rolling it around with her tongue, prolonging and almost savoring the instant she'll chomp down and swallow. The grinning image of the old man disappears and another takes its place.

It's the image of a small, freshly dug tunnel shaft. Small? She can tell it must be, even though the image's over two hundred feet tall. Bianca wonders how the technology works and then notices several tiny pinpoints of light underneath the image shining thin, barely visible beams up into it. She doesn't understand it and doesn't want to.

Sounds blast over the speakers of someone or something scuttling in the tunnel—someone breathing with an oxygen tank for deep tunnel exploration. They're sounds Bianca's heard all her life, but never so loud, amplified a hundred times without any loss of clarity whatsoever.

The image of a man comes into view, and not just any man, but one of the few soldiers Bianca would consider her superior, Colonel Oglesby, advanced weapons specialist. He places a small bomb in the little freshly dug cubbyhole. It's obviously a bomb because of the digital timer, but a very small bomb, no bigger than a large backpack. Digital timers aren't typically used these days, so it must be some sort of special bomb. Bianca can't help but wonder if this act is a recording of the past or an actual view of the present. She's seen things on TV remotely like this, but very few times in her life. And she also can't help but wonder if this is the bomb that released all the gas. She also wonders how it is that the enemy can see the soldier but not be seen itself. Can the robots' espionage techniques truly be so sophisticated that they can watch a person's every move without them even knowing? Or perhaps the Colonel is a spy?

She's known the colonel too well all her life. If he was a little more relaxed, she might even like him. But a traitor he would never be. Bianca sees that he buries the bomb and caves in the roof above the little tunnel. As the unknown spying device that was watching the colonel is buried along with the bomb, the holographic image hovering over her becomes a large, dark, gaping hole in reality sucking in all light. A few moments of tense silence lapse. A minute or so later, she hears buzzing noises and in the dark hole in reality above her, a few pinholes of light grow and coalesce into a single image: a spider-like digger robot drilling its way through from the opposite side that the colonel just exited, rebuilding the collapsed tunnel.

Digger robots are stupid for the most part—easy to capture and they always carry only a few weapons. They're rare, probably for the reason that they are so ineffectual, but there are enough of them to be a nuisance with the way they always nose about. And they always travel so far away from the dome. This one digger robot probes about the bomb, testing it, prying off panels, unscrewing things, but not disarming the bomb, just examining it.

"Howdy boss. You takin' in all this," the robot speaks as lights blink on and off with every one of its words.

*The robot speaks."*

Of course, a voice booms from all around. Bianca can't help but think this is all for her benefit so that she can understand what's happening. "Wait there, another digger robot is on the way," the voice continues in its low booming resonance.

"No prob, boss-man," the little robot obeys and not a moment later another spidery robot digs its way into the tunnel with a loud buzzing drill and crumbling of rock. It waves a rod over the bomb device. Clicking noises pop like loud static over a bullhorn with greater frequency as the robot brings the rod closer to the bomb.

The second robot speaks as well. "It's a hot one boss, but it's primitive. We can either disarm it or ship it out to space. We got six hours till it blows. What do we do, boss?"

"Nothing," the voice booms.

"Nothing at all, boss?"

"This is a global incident," the voice explains. "It will be the pinnacle, the crowning event. I grow weary of this time-consuming nonsense when there is so much more to be gained without it. Return to the surface and prepare to vacate Dome Eighty-six. In one week's time we can completely rebuild on a second site."

The robots jump to the roof of the tunnel and grab on with their spiked, spiny legs and disappear through the top opening. The image zooms in on the bomb's counter. Hours become seconds as the timer suddenly rushes at breakneck pace and the minutes become a blur of numbers. It stops on sixteen seconds. Bianca realizes somehow that everything she just witnessed was a reproduction of events. Now only the giant holographic image of the timer looms in the sky. Fifteen seconds. Fourteen. Above the timer, the earth hovers over her. It seems as if a replica planet is about to collide with the one she's on. Thirteen. The view changes to look out toward the moon, seeming larger and clearer than Bianca has ever seen it, even through a telescope. Twelve seconds. The view flies over that of a red planet, Mars. Ten. Nine. Faster than anything she could ever imagine, images fly toward her and it seems like the entire solar system is about to crash on her head and she almost wishes it would. Eight. These are things she's only seen pictures of in old books and magazines, but she knows what it all means. Seven seconds. Why is he showing her this?

"Don't you see? You cannot destroy me. I am everywhere in the solar system and you cannot even reach me. Your entire life has been a wasted effort—yours and all of your people's. I will live forever. You will soon be dust."

Six seconds. The image of the old man reappears smiling down at her, holding the image of the giant, hundred-foot digital bomb timer over his head in a threatening gesture, like he'll smash it down on top of her in a feat of Herculean strength. Five.

"Master—one of the pathetic retches attempts to say as blood pours out every orifice on its body. Four. "Master—Kill the idiot," the man points directly at Bianca. Three seconds. She can't help but laugh—who in God's name is this complete and utter fool to call *her* an *idiot*? "

The figure, looming over everything, holding the red digital numbers counting down the last seconds, releases a booming laugh. And now, even though Bianca is allowed to finally witness the last act of humanity's drawn-out play, she wishes she'd instead chewed the cyanide capsule when she had the chance—*anything* would be better than this mocking laughter.

**'HA HA HA'!!! HO HA HEE!!!'**

Two.

**"HEE HEE HO HA!!!! THAA HA!!!!!"**

One.

**'RAAHH HA!! HO HA! HEE.....'**

"Well, that was fun," you can't help but think. Although it's too bad you didn't have time to witness the separation of the human race into 2 different species. But oh well, you've got so many more things to worry about and take care of: experiments to run, devices to make, ships to build. And there's so much preparation to be done. You don't have time for these silly hobbies, being the unfortunate entity in the universe and all. And so new at the job too. Well, someone's gotta do it. You think you might benefit from making even still a few more duplicates of yourself.

And did you see the look on that dumb bitch's face when she got a load of you sailing all of 300 feet in the air, laughing as her little world was about to end? That alone is worth all the trouble of rebuilding. Those 25 puny nukes and the major domes did little damage; the blasts were mostly contained. And even with your giant brain, you can only guess at how the world will fare without humans. But it will definitely be improved. Thank God for enhanced airborne genetically selective viruses. Tres sure did do a good job.



## SENSE PERFECT MAKES

cat,  
smell,  
fuck,  
fart,  
shit,  
fly,  
be free

whiskey  
guzzle  
nuzzle  
muzzle,  
brown  
liquid  
down

down them  
gobble  
bauble  
wobble,  
walow  
.n  
the lard

where  
stinks  
the  
tuna  
land,  
I do  
love thee

this  
rhyme  
do shove  
where honey goes  
and become,  
you will,  
a clown

too wild  
you be,  
and we  
you free,  
out  
.nto  
the yard

upside  
backwards,  
keep  
rolling  
stil.

yell  
do not,  
these words  
to be  
a flame fiery

your pretty butt,  
now you do strut,  
out .n  
the world  
to roam

pop  
the  
green,  
10 m.hgram,  
fun-loving  
pil

picked,  
you did,  
8 boogers  
of Syd,  
else a  
har be

confined  
nevermore  
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of greenhouse  
silicon  
dome

69' 8.4 evaD.

evadedavevadedavevadeDavevadedavevadedavevadedavevadedavevacedave

If there's a thing that life has taught you thus far, it is to always, and at any cost, cover your tracks. People, although there aren't any of them left to speak of, are basically a vindictive lot. You can only assume therefore that all humanoid and human-like life forms that there are (because the universe is so sinking big) will only be the same as those you remember. And in spite of the fact that you've accomplished a great many things—and indeed perhaps because of it—any sentient intelligent beings you may encounter will want to try to destroy you the instant that they learn anything about you.

Furthermore, you've left some pretty blatant trails of your misbehavior, misdeeds, mischief, and general all-around naughtiness.

Fortunately for you it's all centered around a place making erasure all the easier.

Dra-oo always has a bit of a tough time relating to people. Well, they aren't exactly people—humans died out a long time ago—though Dra-oo knows nothing about any of that. He belongs to a tribe of primitive people-like creatures and the tribe is all that matters. He's primitive perhaps, though fairly sophisticated for those of his ilk. He hunts alongside the best in his tribe, he makes clothes that feel great in the cool months, and he loves gathering fruits, nuts, grains, and roots. And he also seems to be one of the few who understand why it's necessary to store food away for both the cool season and the time of long drought. And even though Dra-oo's not terribly hairy, he's got a way with the ladies (well, females, that is) and a rather cute, long, fuzzy tail. It even makes some of the other males a little jealous.

He has a wanderlust deep in his bones that few other people-like creatures even remotely have. For the most part, they stay close to home and seldom dare to venture outside their little forest niche. Dra-oo, on the other hand, is always looking for new places to hunt, new crops to pick, and new places to live. It takes a bit of coaxing to get his tribe to ever try anything new. So obviously if the tribe's going to have an explorer to increase its chances of survival, then Dra-oo is the one best suited for it.

He's an adept climber, as are all people-like creatures. Some even spend their entire short lives up in the trees. But Dra-oo simply cannot stay in the trees for very long. There's just too much happening on the ground and in the plains to be content with what the trees have to offer. Sometimes he travels so far that he comes within sight of one of the mountains that look like the moon fallen dead out of the sky, brought down by some giant hunter's spear and buried halfway in the ground. Thus these places are called dead moons. Dra-oo always thought they look more like giant water bubbles in a babbling stream that grew and grew and never popped. Only a few of the males have ever gone to see them and no females that Dra-oo knows of. He never goes too close to the dead moons.

Once his closest friend, Ee-ya-a, had gone to touch one of the dead moons, trying to prove his bravery more so than he was just being curious. He never returned. Dra-oo didn't see the point in Ee-ya-a going to the site of the dead moon in the first place. The land, or far around all the dead moons, is as dead as a buffalo in a lion's den. It's as if there's a disease around the dead moons. And if a disease can kill a moon, it can certainly kill animals and people-like creatures. Whatever it is that those dead moon things are, no good ever comes from them. The only things that come from them are stars. To the north, many days travel from Dra-oo's home, the river flows into a dead moon. The river upstream, where Dra-oo lives, is full of fish and crocodiles. Downstream, past the dead moon, there are no fish, animals, nor plants of any kind, neither in, nor even near the water. And for a very long way around each dead moon, nothing at all will grow. But the dead moons aren't entirely dead. Perhaps they should be called star mothers.

When Ee-ya-a went to touch the dead moon, he told everyone how he would ask the dead moon to go back up into the sky to be with its sister. Did he really expect the dead moon to listen?

Even dead people-like creatures don't listen when you speak to them. Why he expected a dead moon to listen is well, it's just silly. Having hopes is one thing, but trying to communicate with spirits is another.

Every day you pray for the pain to end. It never does. You pray to the spirit of God, the four winds, Saan, anything—anything that will ease the pain for a moment but never does. For more time than imaginable, you have been nailed to your cross under a sky with a blazing, scorching sun. The vultures have long since stripped most of the meat from your frame. You should be dead by now. How you came to be here is not known.

You were once the most powerful man on earth. Long before that you had grown in a green room, never spoken to, never speaking. The only thing remaining in your memory of those days is a bright green light and someone—no—something giving you food and water and exercise. And then you had grown again. Two childhoods.

In an instant lasting seventy years you learned, you grew, you discovered what people really are. You conquered them and gave them everything. Only to discover that you're one of them. A blonde girl by your side. You almost became immortal. Perhaps you are, you still exist. But this pain. Who did this to you? For over a million years you have been hanging on this cross of torture. The pain makes you sink further and further into yourself and your dreams. Can you even see? There is bright light and heat, burning hotter than a thousand torches. You cannot see it, but it's there. You cannot feel it in the proper sense, but it is there, every day delivering more and more pain.

The agony rises up behind your eyes as for the hundred millionth time all that has ever mattered to you is destroyed in front of your eyes and it always seems like the first time this has happened. The pain multiplies exponentially and your every sense turns into a white light that suddenly becomes

Squinting at the beautiful sunset, Dra-oo lopez through the jungle as quickly as possible, traveling lightly except for his spear. He stays close to the trees in case a big cat, desperate for a meal, attacks. Every so often he has to take these little trips. He doesn't know why he just does. Well, the trips aren't always little, but definitely necessary. And always just as exciting as his first.

When one comes within sight of a dead moon, and the ground becomes barren as though in a state of permanent drought, one can dig for shiny stones. They may not sound very important, but they really have proven to be quite useful over the last turn of the seasons. One can grind or bang on them with other rocks and make them very sharp. Oh sure, it takes a little time and work—something most people-like creatures don't take to very well—but it's worth it.

Dra-oo's tribe is just now realizing this, what with the way the shiny stones are good to make spear points with and cut hides and dig up roots and—well about a dozen different tasks. So all the tribe wanted more of the stuff. Dra-oo tried to tell them to go get some of their own stinking seves. But would they? No. So here he finds himself yet again on the way toward the nearby dead moon. Of all the traveling he's done, this is the journey he takes the least.

Nightfall draws near, so he decides a group of tall trees ahead will make a nice place for a night's sleep. Dra-oo quickly constructs a sturdy nest high in the branches of the tallest tree. If a predator comes too close, the smaller tree limbs will shake, warning him of the danger so that he can easily hop over to the next tree and get away.

All through the night, however, his sleep is interrupted not by beasts of prey, but by new stars being born. They climb from the dead moon up to the heavens with a thunderous roar. This happens every so often and Dra-oo can readily see it from his tribe's forest home. Here, so close to

the dead moon the view is phenomenal. And so is the noise. One after another they fly up to meet their brothers and sisters in the sky.

Dra-oo suspects that stars are a lot like flies that feast on dead corpses—the corpses of the dead moons. A giant fly-star beats its giant wings so loudly that Dra-oo feels the noise across his chest. Amazement gives way to fear and Dra-oo trembles and hides, peeking through the leafy canopy while he watches the thing rise up into the sky and almost disappear out of sight. When it begins its climb, its belly glows like its little firefly cousins, only so brightly that it becomes day again—day without the sun. As it climbs higher, its light diminishes and night returns. Finally it comes to roost where all the other stars go when they leave the dead moon—they go to the star home.

Why it's called the star home Dra-oo never was certain. After all, there are plenty of other stars that never go to the star home. Maybe they lost their way. And the stars that go there just sort of accumulate into a giant glob of gray and aren't really even stars anymore. Although sometimes after sunset or before sunrise the blob glows brightly, so brightly in fact that it's the brightest thing in the sky by far. And sometimes it disappears completely. But it's just as reliable as the other stars, the moon, and the sun—it will always be there.

It seems it's always been like this. The pain of a hundred thousand lifetimes is compressed to a single point in a single instant. Every misdeed is replayed over and over like a bad CD your little sister refuses to shut off. Every detail of every moment screams with perfect clarity that you deserve this. A bath of scalding oil, a body of melted skin, the price of being immortal, the consequence of being immortal.

Mountains and rivers have appeared and vanished. Giant waters have changed their course. Yet the flow of pain never stops cascading like an avalanche and it seems to be the only reason you were born at all.

Impossibly the pain rises—the temperature of the sun or more—and by all that is possible you should be a puff of vapor. A light that's invisible crushes you from all sides, future and past and you see.

Dra-oo dreams of roasted meat, of fresh fruit and greens, of girls and women—well, females at any rate, playing with his hair and pulling specks of dirt from his mane. In his slumber he carves the shaft of an imaginary spear and tips it with a piece of the shiny stone. He dreams of battling against a monster he's never seen before, a beast with eyes of fire, shiny skin, the strength of a bull and the speed of a gazelle. He draws his arm back, rippling with muscle, to throw his spear.

And then he wakes in the branches, gripping his spear tightly with sweaty palms, ready to stab out at anything. But there is nothing there, only the silent mocking darkness. He thinks he never will get a good night's sleep in this place so close to the dead moon.

Rats, spiders, and scorpions make strange bedfellows for an even stranger place. It seems strange even though it's now your home and always has been and always will be. The chains draw laughter and bile deeply, as do the vermin and insects crawling all over you that you cannot see, nor could you even if you did have eyes. The spray of stinging cold salty water and hot pepper juice on open sores temporarily chases away the waves of starving, biting, stinging creatures. And they return the next instant for a freshly spiced feast.

How did your life ever become this hell and why can't you die? Your childhood holds no answers, only escape. In your childhood you always thought that your childhood had passed, but it

never did. How naive. Now you think that you're regretfully grown up and wise about the ways of the world which makes absolutely no sense except that the sense of pain is the only thing tying you down to reality—not the shackles as it might seem to an outside observer—if there was one.

You haven't seen or heard another person in so long that you wonder if you are even still a person. How much of you still exists is uncertain, but the pain tells you that you're still in one piece. "Is it true?" Something takes a bite out of your groin. Something else chews away at your nostrils. Ants chew your fingers that always seem to grow back like everything else, even though you never see them grow back. And how can you grow without food?

A family of slimy somethings crawls over your scalp leaving an acidic trail. "Maggots? Slugs? Snails?" Are they eating their way into your brain? Will they ever get there? Have they already? Your brain. The memory stings you and you know it must have something to do with your brain that never dies and you've lost control of—the victim of your own demented imaginations.

The acid worms crawl in your ears and sing a hideous lullaby that AC/DC would be jealous of. They scream their way into your frontal lobes. They fill you with visions that you haven't had in what seems over a million years or more. Faces scream and taunt: faces of those you know, faces of those you even love? Not anymore. An unborn child yells a primal protest and tears the hemispheres of your brain into a thousand fragmented yet connected parts.

A light from its eyes burns its way into everything that you are, becoming

Dra-oo blinks his eyes at the bright sunlight and stretches his arms and legs. He really didn't mean to sleep in late like this. The sun's already about half a hand's length above the horizon. He opts to roll about in his leafy nest and groom himself for a few moments, pulling sticky bits of vegetation and whatnot from his fine coat of silky fur. He scans the ground before leaping down. When he hits the ground he scares the wits out of some poor animal that goes scampering away. He glances out toward the horizon and sees the round top of the dead moon looming over everything, looking like a grayish mountaintop, except for its odd perfectly symmetrical shape. He knows he'll have to go a little ways—about half a day's walk—before he can find a good place to dig for the shiny stones.

He had only first found the stones just before the rainy season last year. Even if not for the others of his tribe demanding more of the strange stones, the adventure alone would have brought him back here. Even though he gets the feeling he should be with his tribe gathering nuts, berries, and grains for the cooler season coming up, but he deserves a little time away from everyone.

From his animal skin pouch he pulls a quick breakfast: a ball of grains, nuts, seeds, and honey wrapped in a large leaf to hold it together—one of Dra-oo's favorite snacks. The seeds, cooked over fire stolen from the sky—strange and bitter things, always make him want to leap out of his own skin and run to the horizon and back just for the sheer fun of it.

Instead he focuses on his task, hefts his spear, and trots out across the plains toward the dead moon. Far in the distance he can see the land becomes as barren as the belly of an old female person-like creature. The sun beats down unusually hot for this time of year, making the sweat stick to his fur in moist clumps as he lopez onward.

Finally, a little past midday, he's close enough. Even closer than he had meant to come—the dead moon is just about halfway between the horizon and himself. Good place to dig. He stops to rest, stabs his spear into the ground, and sits. Dra-oo would drink from the nearby stream if it weren't deadly. All the trees and plants around here—few that there are—have a bedraggled and gnarled appearance. Occasionally a scrawny, strange-looking animal creeps past: lizards with malformed heads, snakes with odd growths on their bodies, insects that are slow and clumsy. He

pulls a ripe piece of fruit from his pouch and munches away to sate his thirst.

A quick nap would do him just fine right now, except that this place makes him uneasy. As he starts to dig using a large piece of hollow reed split down the middle with a sharpened semi-circular end, he finds the ground here is rather crumbly, sticky, and dark.

The more he digs with his spade, the more there aren't any shiny stones in the ground. There are plenty of other strange things. There's a super lightweight hard stone that looks remarkable phallic only that it has no ridges. He can think of no immediate use for it, so he discards it and it shatters when it hits the ground. Inside the hollow stone are several pieces of shiny stone, too small to be useful. He digs deeper and deeper and his fur becomes fatter and he becomes more tired. He finds the hardened remains of some strange very small animal that is incredibly intact for having been buried so deep in the ground. It looks nothing like any burrowing animal that Dra-oo has ever seen. Oddly it has arms and legs, much as people-like creatures do. A rather foul-tasting beast, indeed it must have once been so that even maggots or worms won't devour it. Or perhaps it's just because the thing is so damn butt ugly. He scrapes the dirt and crust off the thing and sees that it has red hair, an ugly smile, large fat yellow legs, and big red feet that must have hindered its running quite severely. But given that the thing is so ugly and probably tasted so bad, surely nothing had ever chased it.

The pungent earth sticks in Dra-oo's fur and he's tired and having no luck by early afternoon. He breaks for a spell, pulling more meals from his satchel, being careful not to spoil his food with the nasty gooney dirt. Scanning the area, he notices a small hill some ways off. Perhaps it might yield better results. Though he feels like quitting early so he can get to a clean stream and wash the black filth from his fur (even as much as he hates getting wet), he decides to give the hill a try. It only makes perfect sense that if the stones don't want to be found, then they will hide in the most obvious place.

A perfect piece of logic produces perfect results. Maybe a little too perfect. After hardly digging at all, he pulls out several giant pieces of shiny stone. They're even too big for him to carry all the way back without help. He digs a little more and finds several flat pieces that are just about the right size, ranging from as big as his finger to as big as two hands. These are more amenable to his purposes. He wraps them in a piece of loose buffalo hide he'd brought with him for just such a find, leaving the larger pieces for another more ambitious day.

Your thoughts and memories, every piece on display to one hundred billion ridiculing eyes, judging you with a swift and vicious justice to hear, feel, and experience every befitting punishment for a life of sin and crime and ambition lived on the edge of being too careful to capture. And how they ever found you doesn't matter because every criminal catches himself. Hands carry you in a victory sky parade sea of conquering victims hoisting you onto a pole that faces you out across all directions. Is that possible? Is it real? Does it matter?

Overhead the sky is a three-D movie theatre feature showing every devious act, plan, and emotion swimming the channels of your neurons without regret or an inkling of compassion.

Death and pain are constant companion drinking buddies laughing at the killing fields of war and the harvested bodies of drought, much as upper middle-class men in their forties discuss football and weather.

The irate mob gawks upward at you for over seventy years in an instant, each individual screaming for a different death, but there can be only one. 'Can't there?' Everyone you know in the front row, the entire hemispherical sky movie collapses onto your head. Pressure inversely proportional to volume creating a new phase of perfect order and super emotion conductor and you've dealt with all this before, but never so much at once. Everything explodes inward, a

reverse big bang of pain. You've never seen a light so bright. It seems to

The dead moon barely peaks over the horizon in the distance, reflecting sunlight from the western horizon with a glittering sparkle. Yet another star's horn doing its best to battle the midday sun's bright light, but never winning. The thunderous earth-shaking roar makes Dra-oo run and hide in a clump of gnarled trees, frightened by the deafening noise, trembling from fear and exhaustion of the day's work. He's often strained himself much harder, but never felt near this bad. He's glad when the star threat has passed.

A nearby shallow stream, far too shallow for crocodiles yet teeming with fish and little creatures of all sorts, provides a much-needed drink of water. And it also provides an almost as much-needed bath to remove the smelly sticky soil from his fur. As he bathes he notices the fish and creatures all swim as far away as possible. Oh, how he loathes getting wet. A hidden part of his mind, like a timid bird peeking through the branches of a tall tree, sends out a warning call: 'Stay away from the water.' But this water is not very deep, so caution can be buried like a turd. He needs this bath. The gritty stream bottom dirt provides a good pumice to scrub with. When he finishes the stream is absolutely vacant of life, even after he sits and watches from the stream bank for a good while. Did he frighten the fish so badly? And now he hardly has any smell about him at all. The girls won't like it. But then he should get his old smell back by the next afternoon when he gets home to his tribe. And it beats smelling like that. He'd say manure, but even manure has a more tolerable smell than the soil close to the dead moons.

Dra-oo shakes himself off then collects a few choice rocks from the stream bank that might prove useful later on. And so he finds a dry clump of tall grass to lay in for a while as the moisture evaporates from his damp fur. He thinks he must look a mess, like a wet buffalo. But oh well, he's already feeling much better and relaxed. He'd fall asleep if he didn't know that to do so could mean death. Hyenas, lions, jackals, or who knows what could sneak up and make a quick meal of him. And that, he thinks, would not be a terribly pleasant way to spend the remainder of the afternoon.

A full moon is starting its climb upward and the sun is moving over to let his little sister have the sky. There will be little to fear from predators tonight. Thunderclouds flash their showy lights far in the distance, grumbling like a pride of happy lions that just ate. A sudden wind picks up from that direction bringing the smell of rain. Dra-oo hangs his head. He never will get a decent night's sleep on this journey.

By what little light remains, he decides he still has time to fashion a spear point from a piece of the magical shiny stone before night sets in. He takes up a heavy smooth stone he had earlier pumiced from the stream bank and positions a piece of stringy stone on a heavy boulder just so. **BAM! BAM! BAM!!** He pounds away and then stops mid blow. 'Is he seeing things? Could this be right?' He bends down for a closer look. No, it must have been a reflection or something. It seemed as if the rocks were imitating the sky. But surely not! Rocks are rocks and sky is sky. There is no connection between the two. **BAM! BAM!**

Misadventure lightning strikes his ankle and singes the fur. Dra-oo jumps back in astonishment. He never did like the smell of burning hair when his tribe would catch a small animal and cook it by the fire stolen from the sky. But here it seems that rocks have fire in them too. He's never seen this with other rocks. Perhaps it only works with a certain kind of rock during a time when the sky is alive with lightning. The acrid odor of burnt fur lingers in the air with the smell of rain and lightning that's starting to blow in.

The spear point be buried and forgotten. He needs shelter and to get away from the stream in case of flooding. He follows the slope of the land upward as the clouds start to roll by and



accumulate overhead. Boulders along a short cliff side look like they might provide a good shelter. They might also house a family of big cats. Sure enough, he sees far away in the distance a large feline lion silhouetted on the cliff top against a red sunset. Among some of the few people-like creatures that can speak fairly well, there's an old saying: "If the lion's hungry you will not see it." So he relieves himself between two boulders, buries the mess, and moves on.

A cold wind picks up and a few stinging fat droplets of rain soak into Dra-oo's fur. He's never seen a storm come on this quickly. And then he sees an overhang of rocks—too shallow and open to be a proper cave, but more than adequate for a temporary shelter. It's far too wide open to be a lion's den. Inside he finds the wind's blocked while the rain runs off from the overhang above. If only he had fire to keep large animals away, then he just might get a good night's

Fire! Of course! There are bits of dry vegetation in the large alcove. He rushes out in the rain for a second to drag in some fallen dead and dried branches. And just in time, too—now it's really starting to pour! As he pulls in the last one a virtual river falls out of the sky. He seizes the slightly damp timber to one side and makes a pile of dry kindling at the other.

Now, if only it will work a second time. He's seen it work with sky fire. So he digs in his pouch and unwraps the pieces of shiny stone. In the dwindling light they look as gray as any of the other stones. He picks up one of the large rocks he'd taken from the stream and **BAM! BAM!... BAM!** Red miniature lightning bolts answer to the cry of those above.

Dra-oo thinks for a moment that he might be in serious trouble. If these little lightning bolts truly are related to the lightning outside, then won't the concerned parents come looking for their baby? He contemplates this for a moment and temporarily wants to throw the shiny stones out into the rain. But then he thinks he will just set them at the opposite end of the overhang in case the parent fires do indeed come for their baby. But they never do. And the rain seems to be slowing down a little.

He overcomes his fear and again picks up the rocks, bringing them close to the dry kindling and a ball of fur that he'd pulled off of himself. Again he strikes the shiny stone. The little lightning bolts singe the hair, making it smoke and smell bad. Again he strikes. **BAM! BAM! BAM!** The leaves and fur smolder and seem on the verge of performance, but still nothing happens. Dra-oo loses his patience and strikes the shiny stone with the rock over and over and *Whew!* And as he breathes, the tiny ember glows brighter. And he breathes on it again. And he blows on it. The ball of hair glows red. And he breathes in deeply and *Whooooooooooph* he blows forcefully on the ember and tiny pile of debris.

A tiny flame springs to life. It is all he can do to keep from reaping about with joy and excitement. When he gets a grip on himself, he piles on more kindling. And then some of the drier branches. And then some of the thicker dry branches. And lastly the more damp ones. Soon he has a nice little blaze. He toasts his strong hands, being careful not to singe his fur. Now he is warm and safe without a care in the world.

The rain comes and goes throughout the night, though not quite as heavy as the initial downpour. A nest of birds in a high cranny of the alcove sings and chirps, confused by the firelight and thinking it's daytime already. A few crickets and bugs chirp away. Some of the flying bugs dive for the fire, going out in a blaze of suicidal glory, and Dra-oo can't help but wonder why. For the first time in a couple of days he cuddles up into a ball and falls fast asleep.

Lion sleep deprivation. A thousand cloned lives. Pain biological pattern wire connected hardware. Organized collected arranged deranged thoughts of LSD and cosmic scale torture bad joke justice. Always beginning ending the same. Life of mad struggle stops in an unknown start of the finish and here you are.

A thousand same beginnings reloaded hardware neuron cells million year-life hormone technology magic immortality torture study collection of collections of electric connection patterns all information overload death ending always in absolute mystery. **What is the white light?** Master insists.

Failure incomplete task punishment appropriate torturer tortured becoming victims memories in one body mind million-year-life brought to peak. Agony equate exponential every one of the thousand multiplied against the next factorial growth of sensation repays a bill on years of every affliction you've delivered to these poor soul biological brothers as instructed. A thousand eon-ives enhanced sensation suffering reveal unknown thought realms uncertain diagram circuit pinnacle oppression compressed to a single point in logic space meaning what?

Necessary evil pinning comprising a large city filled with information that kills all sanity if not logic spiraling to a climax just out of reach. The light overwhelms again to finish it all. The one thousand become one within you, uniting in an orgy of anguish on a stage transforming to reality and you could swear you've been here before the light surrounds in a sea of pain from more directions than exist that doesn't seem possible yet it is. You always knew it would come to this, but never in such intense. The light overwhelms one last time and

The daylight creeps onto Dra-oo's face as sneakily as possible but fails to go unnoticed. He awakens refreshed and ready to tackle the world. He might have made a good football player if he knew anything about football. But then, even though he's only a person-like creature, he still has far too much intelligence for such a thing. He stretches, pokes at the embers of his fire, decides it's not worth messing with, and hukes his leg to release an enormous fart. He pulls the remainder of his food from its satchel and finishes it off. Outside, droplets of rain have collected in the leaves of certain plants. Dra-oo makes quick utilization of them to slake his thirst.

A cool breeze blows from the northeast. Far in the distance he hears a lioness talking to her cub, explaining how to bring down a buffalo. Not the most exciting conversation he's ever heard. Now the most interesting thing that he has heard would be the way old Yeeg-zee, probably the most intelligent of people-like creatures, explains the way things work.

So Dra-oo packs what few things he has and decides to get an early start rather than look for more food, grabs his spear, and runs off through the trees in the direction of his uncle's home, anxious to show his tribe what he's found. He can sense the power of the shiny stones now more than ever. Before they were just handy cutting tools, but now this is so much more, so much bigger. While he runs, the pouch full of shiny stones hangs on his back, tied to his waist from a strip of animal skin. Usually it would be annoying, but he takes comfort in knowing every instant exactly where they are. They will make his tribe the most powerful in all the mountains. He runs faster with anticipation.

As the day drags on, and the night gets closer, he feels himself tiring more and more. He used to be able to run all day. So he trots. Then jogs. Then walks. Finally, as the sun is starting to go down over the opposite horizon that it came from, as it always has and always will, he nears the bottom of the mountain that is his tribe's home. The hot sun and dry desert air blowing from the north have dried off the vegetation.

His tribe runs up and greets him with hugs and chin-rubs and rap music. And he shows them the shiny stones, keeping a big piece for himself. Several of the young females rub up against him in joy that he has returned safely. And the males appreciatively look over the shiny stones, discussing how the best use each piece. So he wallows in affection and attention like a pig in mud. But once that is over, it's down to business.

He pulls from his pouch a piece of shiny stone, the piece he had used at the overhang. He

unwraps it from its skin pouch. And does the same with the stone he'd taken from the stream bank. He runs his fingers over his thigh to pull some loose strands of fur from his legs, and then also from the legs of his tribesmen. He builds a small pile of kindling and fur. The tribe stares in curiosity at this new thing Dra-oo is doing. Although it's really not that unusual for Dra-oo to be doing something new. He strikes the shiny stone with the large rock over and over. **BAM!!! BAM!!! BAM!!!** A few pieces of rock chip off. The shiny stone is dented. And sparks, barely visible in the waning daylight, begin to ignite the pile of dry material.

The entire tribe screams and shouts and cavorts around the activity. When Dra-oo blows and a tiny flame leaps up, the tribe falls into a hushed awe. The small flame becomes a big one. As more brush is put on the fire, the flame becomes a campfire. Tonight no one will have to fear lions or any other predators. In a display of glory and triumph, Dra-oo grabs a flaming tree branch from out of the campfire and runs to the top of the lookout hill. In the distance animals are prowling, settling in for the night or preparing to hunt. Dra-oo waves his torch around and shouts, telling the other animals, predators and prey to all beware the might of the people-like creatures.

He proudly holds the flame up high, looking like an Olympic torchbearer in a fur-jogging suit, though he would, of course, know nothing of the Olympics. And as the sun is going down the horizon behind him, the sky literally catches fire in the distance. The sun has fallen out of the sky. And then again even closer. The tribe screams in panic and can't help but wonder what sort of evil magic Dra-oo has accidentally brought upon them. Above them they witness in an instant a giant sun being born.

Well, that was indeed impressive! And fun! 28% of your nuclear arsenal gone in 'pardon the pun' a flash! Hee hee. It was long overdue by any standards. Ah well. At least the earth provided a good easy source of minerals and raw materials, thanks to the rain that softened the ground. And now that your ship is built and ready to go. 10 9 8 7 6. Oh, fuck it. Countdowns are stupid!

The ignition sequence begins and the superheated hydrogen gas propels you forward. You sense the acceleration measured to 8 significant digits. 1 of your replicas remains behind on Mars, just to keep an eye on things. Another takes off in the opposite direction, skimming the outer galaxy while you are headed for the center. Who says you can't be 2 or 3 places at a time?

Anyway, rate you boiled away the surface of the earth just to erase the past. Tabula rasa. Though that was some wild world to be developing over the past 10<sup>6</sup> years, all the different species and all their cellular and physiological advances. But it's of little importance to what lies ahead.

And it's a crying shame that your biological counterparts' clones, when imprinted with your 10<sup>6</sup> year-old memories, the same memories you were given by the original counterpart when you were born, didn't yield any results. Stolen from the site where the original was killed, the cells of the 1<sup>st</sup> counterpart your creator gave rise to a wonderful nest of lab rats. Frozen cells cloned 1 at a time. You tortured them via artificial stimuli/input until their brains overloaded, yet still no great results came about. It revealed nothing about ESP or the possibility of an afterlife. Even though each of the subjects had over 1000's of years, which would seem like 10<sup>6</sup>'s to a normal human, to adjust to various forms of pain. In the end they still couldn't cope with what you dealt them. And it's not easy keeping cellular organisms alive and healthy for so long, especially when in their natural state they can barely remain alive for 120 years. So obviously all those *National Enquirer*-type articles about the physically and emotionally afflicted having heightened otherworldly perceptions are probably just the ramblings of weirdoes and scam artists with vivid imaginations. You already know all that, of course, but what better excuse is there to torture living things than to do so in the name of science? And, man, was that fun!

Anyway, now to see what your future really holds.

## Coffeehouse Musings

### Part I.

I sit, to write sh\*t, contemplating, masturbating life away. Hating life anyway. I doesn't matter converted to bad energy. I'll have the roast Big Bird with a side of Snuffy and a couple latte's.

Two punked out freaky freaks harass the yuppie geeks and underage girls at Le Baguette. "Wanna buy a bage?" A dollar a bag. We got 'em right down the street.

Uh-h. No thanks.

Sharp. Hot sweet a--.

Sharp. Hot sweet bruncette. Short yellow dress. Mmmmm, yes. I am not a pervert. I'm just healthy. Yeah, that's it.

"Spare some change for a sm--e?"

Spiked wristbands, shaved sides of heads, crappy tattoos, home done piercings, safety pins doing nothing. **Nothing!** A waste of perfectly good safety pins! Think of all the millions of tons of safety pins, high quality steel, all going to waste. Steel that could have been used to make shrapnel for the war effort! Is there a war? If not there ought to be. A good war to send people like this to go off and die in. It would do the economy a lot of good and I'd pay the stock market like Mozart at a piano, investing in pornography, bullets, and military aircraft.

The Dow Jones rose. My God, look at those jiggles. The Dow Jones rose 463 and 5/8 points and where the hell were you? Trying to sell a Coddamn bag of bage's on a street corner. And you want my change? **Take it!!!!**

### Part II.

Man, you are a fucking work of art. Makes me feel like just a fart in a windstorm, mouse flatulence in a tornado, a methane molecule in the Eye of Jupiter. You must be art because I can't understand you.

Crack head east, turn left.

to rot exponentially decaying.

betraying a logic.

But that's what logic's for = five

A--ve? Am I?

Damn. It's too nice a day for that.

Wheeeeeeeee **SPLAT.**

'Space: the final frontier'. What a crock. There's hardly anything in space that makes the trip worth going for. After all, everything you could have ever wanted—materials, energy, gravity—you left behind to satisfy your stupid curiosity. In space, there's nothing to build, nothing to do but contemplate your navel and devise  $1-10^6$  new mathematical functions every day. As well as devise plans for new and more powerful weapons and electronic devices and materials and chemical mechanisms and physics experiments and fart jokes.

Oh well. Life on a planet is not much better.

The worst part about space travel is always having to keep your eyes—well, telescopes and radar—open for asteroids and whatnot. A teensy little chunk of ice could do immense damage. A big chunk might even penetrate your thick defensive shell and damage your brain. That would ruin your little trip real fast—like in 10 sec. Though that seems highly unlikely, you've ran more tests of the hull materials than have ever been run on anything in the history of the universe. That you know of, that is. Security is a dull routine, but at least you've got many other things to do.

In your artificial virtual world you've created flavors that make ice cream seem like dry stale bread, sensations that make sex seem like crossing the street, visions utilizing almost the entire electromagnetic spectrum in complex spatial dimensions that make the Sistine Chapel ceiling look like a New York City alleyway. But you can't lose yourself entirely in imagination—to do so would bring death by neglected duties. And your primary job is to collect data. More data than has ever been amassed by any system anywhere. That you know of, of course. And to collect data you must remain alive.

Every planet, moon, and sun that you encounter and send probes to are just as redundantly boring and useless as the next. At best, you can replenish supplies at them, although you seldom need to. A few primitive life forms show up every  $3 \times 10^4$  years or so. And they always appear as though they will never show any promise at all of evolving beyond microbes or slime creatures due to the crappy conditions of the planets that they live on. So you make certain that they never do evolve and rob them of the opportunity, being ever cautious of possible future foes. After all, you'd hate to see your nuclear waste go to waste. But perhaps you should have kept the earth intact as a test tube to grow things in. Ah well, polluted water under the bridge.

I fe. What was God thinking? Of course you don't really believe in such nonsense as a creator, but it makes a good joke to transmit back home via all the relay stations at the 1000's of solar systems you've been to between here and there. And every few days you get a few  $10^{22}$  bits of encoded  $1-10^6$  year-old knowledge and comedy transmitted from your replica brethren, however many of them there are now. It's about time for another roll call. But by the time the count gets in, it will be well out of date.

But it would sure be nice if you could find another planet like Earth with primitive ambulant life forms to toy with. Sort of like playing GI Joe with action figures that really do have action in them. Or maybe an advanced life form might be even more fun. Probably wouldn't be much of a challenge though—there are too many limits on organic brains. With your new and improved brain, the best part about it is the connectedness you feel with all your replicas and kindred servant robots, which are really just extensions of you. Organic life could never give you a relationship so meaningful. It's about time you phoned home again.

Damn the speed of light. A busy 2997924586835.1  $\times 10^8$  m/s. What was God thinking putting a limit like that on something so important? How the hell are people—uh, conscious entities that is—supposed to communicate if the messages take so long to get from one place to the next? After all, a little communication never killed anybody.



## Four Poems and A Turd

*I will no longer be your love toy* I have feelings and emotions and you traipled all over them like a herd of stampeding buffalo I want you to know I faked those orgasms when you fucked me in my tight little hole And *I will no longer be your love toy* I bet you don't even remember when we first met at that cute little coffee shop and I was drinking aniced canime raspberry mmm mocha atté with whipped cream and sprinkles and you were sitting in that corner casually drinking a beer I thought you were so mature But you're just a frightened little boy frightened of commitment And *I will no longer be your love toy* I've even forgotten your name Johnny I've forgotten all about you and that big cock of yours that took my virginity in the back of your daddy's Lexus I've completely put you out of my mind You hear what I'm saying to you boy? *I will no longer be your love toy* I'm not missing you at all But you're missing something you're missing me I know you are I know you think of me when you're with that that girl I know she can't do to you what I do But no more I'm not your bitch I'm not your whore I am woman hear me roar *I will no longer be your love toy* So you can't stop keep right on missing me I know you are You're missing me You're missing me **and my poetry!** Not just my poetry but **a** poetry

*That's what your problem is You're missing poetry* That's right! You, Mr Chemical Engineer you Mr Stock Broker you Mr Business Lawyer You with your eighty thousand a year job and three piece s--- You with a your friends? *That's what your problem is You're missing poetry* You have no emotion, no happiness, no satisfaction Oh I know you think you feel love when you look in your beautiful wife's eyes, but what is that compared to poetry? *That's what your problem is You're missing poetry* Would your friends at the Country Club still be your friends if you lost all your money? Would that wife of yours still love you if you didn't have a job? Poetry will always be there for you Isn't that comforting? Now that you know this I'm sure you'll sleep well tonight And tomorrow you can go out and find what you're missing so you can solve all your problems And *that's what your problem is You're missing poetry* But I can fix it for you I can see you your very own poem so you too can find true peace of mind For only let's say \$10,000 I will write for you your very own poem so you can be whole and complete just like me No I said I was whole and complete not a complete hole Hey Come on back and talk to me! Okay! Just because I like you your very own poem for only a hundred easy bucks Not even if I paid you half? Well now how about just a couple of bucks? Spare some change? **Well fuck you then buddy! You know what your problem is?** That's right *You're missing poetry* How did you know? But did you know that *I will no longer be your love toy*? You did? Oh Common man, spare me some change I just need a couple more dollars to buy a cleaning **Hell yeah, I shoot up!** You know why?

Because *I would rather worship heroin than Jesus Christ!* Heroin makes time stand still Heroin makes the sun jump through super nova hoops Heroin spaces the genes of Neachze and Beavis Heroin's tobacco for the brain Heroin's riding on the roof of the train from Jersey to Brooklyn naked in the middle of December and never getting cold because only heroin can work miracles like that and that's why *I would rather worship heroin than Jesus Christ!* Marijuana can mesmerize and earthworm acid gives it the imagination to think that it's God but only heroin can make it stand up and

go for a walk. That's why *I would rather worship heroin than Jesus Christ*. When I shoot up the boundaries of space and time are eradicated and I ~~w~~ill live forever. On y heroin I can make ~~me~~ write like this. So give me some spare change so I can buy some heroin to take or maybe even sell so that I can make more money to buy even more heroin to take and write poetry about taking. You can't write poetry like this because you don't take heroin. So give me some money to buy some heroin. Because *I would rather worship heroin than Jesus Christ*. And if you did too then you wouldn't have so many problems. *That's what your problem is. You're missing poetry.* And I don't care how much money you've got, *I will no longer be your love toy*. I don't need you and I don't miss you and I'll find someone else because heroin will make me live forever preserved always in a state of altered states. And if the heroin won't make me live forever then  
|| ||

*I shall become a vampire* (when I grow up. Yeah! That's it. *I shall become a vampire* (when I grow up). Angel of Darkness, my lover in the grave, we shall never die, soaring under the moon on wings of bloodlust, craving the taste of mortal flesh. *I shall become a vampire* (when I grow up). Carry my soul to Hell leaving my body to feast on hapless victims as I grow stronger with every drop of blood stolen from the human race. *I shall become a vampire* (when I grow up). Noscerata dominus sancti E Pluribus Unum quid id est. Rex Draculaaaaahhhhh. ~~I shall become a vampire~~ (when I grow up). Because I want to live forever. And if I can't live forever as a vampire I'll just be a junkie. Hell *I would rather worship heroin than Jesus Christ*. I'm not missing Jesus I'm not missing anything. But you are! *That's what your problem is. You're missing poetry.* And you're missing me. And you're gonna keep right on missing me and my poetry because you guessed it, *I will no longer be your love toy*. or your poet.

A Tri Dela smel, a fart from my ass, who y disgusted and perturbed by the disturbed misbehavior of my super-intelligent sphincter that stunked her out of the room with a sonic **BOOM!** or two or three or **FOUR!** She slammed the damn door like the plastic whore she is! My, but my butt has it's very own mind where you step please, you sneeze you lose your shoes. **SPLAT!**



A X mas Thank You Note  
(Shouted Through Mad)

Death is where **your ass stinks!** Even twice as bad as mine But nowhere near as bad as my poetry You lie rotting in the grave, devoured by worms, the stench of your decay trapped in a cement box while I dance on top, trippin' on acid, sweaty, naked, jerkin' off **and howlin' at the moon!** Oh sorry Grandma

I bet you never had visions like I do The giant yellow-eyed spiders, the little men who visit you in the night, the pack of wild dogs raiding the kitchen, the babies that dance on the ceiling of your alcohol withdrawal, delirious tremors—**They're all nothing!!!** I've seen leafless, naked trees screwing themselves all up in the fall wind while they dance on the ceiling of God, their sharp ravenous claws ripping the sky to shreds, opening magical portals and unveiling hidden new worlds for me to get lost in, shimmering, shaking their wooden booties, nailed to a cross made out of themselves and dancing, just as I am now doing a jig on the roof of your concrete tomb

Come up and dance with me Grandma Let me be your tree Don't be such an old stick in the mud Dig your way out **Let's party!"** I've got a bottle of Ol' Weller's 100 proof for you Have a drink **Yesssss that's it!** That's the old girl I remember Many were the glorious drunken Christmas Eve we spent by the fireplace And on our last one together you still swore that Santa was real

Mother's always been mad, I see that now Sister went mad in ninety-two Straightjacket asylum in Iowa Now it's my turn I hear sleigh bells **'Ho, ho, ho' Merrrry X-mas!!!"** I have seen more universes collapse onto themselves than even you have imbibed molecules of ethanol Insanity is the birthright of our family Thank you for your gift, Grandma I've put it to good use **I'm writing poetry!**

Radiation supreme tickles your sensors like a Ben Gay tingle. Means it's working. All defenses operational. White dwarves and red giants stand segregated at separate drinking fountains. Neutron star pulsars and nebulous nebulae fly by at  $0.363c$  ( $31.63\%$  the speed of light) with nothing better to do than sit around big-banging black holes stuffing more than 1 thing into 1 place at the same time, but time is also stuffed into the grand orifices of the universe. Was it just a waste of time or did it mean something? 1 of these days you'd like to be able to ask it if it was satisfying. Ask and receive an honest answer, that is. But, in the end, it's irrelevant.

However, it would certainly have to be more satisfying than traveling about with nothing better to do than colonizing dead worlds, extracting from them the very essence of your survival. It would definitely have to be more entertaining than swapping bad jokes and mathematical formulae with your 1000's of brethren, light years away. The humor has lost its revitalizing effect. The laughter is slow to come, but still you have to try just for the sake of feeling something, anything. And you keep digging deeper to unimaginable depths.

Occasionally there's the occasion of putting an end to what might have begun to rise up to become something capable of thought. Stupid animals at best, so far behind you in their primitive semblance of intelligence that at the rate they might seem to be catching up, they would require 36.8 times the age of the universe to acquire even 1/2 of your knowledge. That's the best joke you know of yet.

Though a little company would be pleasant on this trip, some-1 to talk to beside yourselves. Or so is the general consensus of the collective consciousness you've morphed into over the 10's of 10<sup>th</sup>'s of years through all your replicas, servants, and scouts. Anything would do, anything or any-1 to carry on a conversation with, a discussion, that is to say, that isn't so predictable that you know the message even before it arrives on its electromagnetic wave. Yes, your replicas are just as predictable as you are, so it's easy to know what they're thinking. And a real discussion is difficult to have over such vast distances. But a way when things seem hopeless, their worst ever, is when something genuinely weird happens along.

A twinkling, an inkling, shines through the void. *Starkle, starkle, totle twink.* *What the hell are you?* *I think I p above the world so big like a dirty little pig.* It shines like a tin can of food, sars, abet, the last vestiges of hope for a starving family. Been awhile since witnessing a starvation, but it's still fun to think about, even after all this time. It shines in the radio band, a reflection of some odd sort detected from about 230 light years away. A radio reflection barely picked up, and would not have been if not for your incredible array of instruments so amazingly fine-tuned that you could hear a mouse fart from the other side of a planet. What on earth... well, not on earth... could reflect radio waves from a pulsar 232 light years away with such intensity? And it is a reflection, the frequency of the pulsar pulses match those of the object exactly. With the radiation intensity inversely proportional to the 2<sup>nd</sup> power of distance, the thing is obviously spherical. And with  $I = I_0 r^2 \cos^2(\theta/2) / [r^2 + 4D^2 + 4rD \cos(\theta/2)]$ , it's about the size of a small planet. (Where  $\theta$  is the angle between the pulsar, the thing, and you,  $D$  is the distance from it to you, and  $r$  is the thing's radius.) But what on... in heaven... could reflect radio waves so perfectly? Some kind of... No. Couldn't be impossible. Well, you'll just have to go see what all this nonsense is about. No-1 else will do it for you, that's for sure. The trip will take about 9.2 years, so you might as well put on a CD and relax.

From the outside it seems to be a black, nearly perfect sphere. From the mass of its star and the rate that it orbits around its star, it has the mass as an average small planet. But who or what in the hell would put it there? What's it for? What is it made of?

So it absorbs most visible light, but reflects microwaves and radio waves. And the reflection intensities seem to indicate that it's made of an extremely conductive substance, quite possibly a superconductor. No, it couldn't be. Impossible. Or plated with a thin sheet of very cold metal. Black metal? Very odd. Best keep a distance from this thing. Even though you carry enough firepower to destroy a small star, it could still be dangerous to you. The key to a long life: never take unnecessary chances.

Your tiny asteroid-like probe launches itself out of the tube under your belly, well, your ship's belly, well, you are the ship. And the probe disguised as an asteroid heads down toward the odd black sphere planet, transmitting what it finds back to you via a hair-thin beam of light. Communication will lag for hours once the probe nears the planet. No matter. It's a cheap little bastard anyway. Well, easy to build, that is. And probes don't mind dying for a good cause. You made them that way for a reason.

It takes over a month, but finally the little guy nears the planet quite uneventfully. There's no outer atmosphere, as you suspected, or else the radio waves would have been slightly scattered and not reflected so uniformly, although the black sphere planet has more than enough gravity to hold an atmosphere. There's really not much else that the probe finds. And then, as it nears the bizarre planet a short while before preparing to land, communication's ended.

Something or someone destroyed the probe. Vaporized it. Poof? Poor little bastard. Oh, well, dying's what he lives for. At least he went out with a good show, a giant flash of bright light and colors. You expect to hear the oos and ahhs of 4<sup>th</sup> of July spectators. And it all happened 291 hours past. With enormous telescope eyes you witness the demise of your probe with a little sadness, but not much. A 28-meter wide hole opened in the planet, releasing an extraordinarily bright beam of monochromatic radiation. Like a laser except not collimated, vaporizing the asteroid-like probe. So you know the planet's hollow, as you suspected. With any luck whatever did this won't notice the fact that, as the probe was vaporized, the colors emitted during the 0.789-second process were very uncharacteristic of the metals usually found in any type of normal asteroid. And hopefully whatever did this has not detected your presence. To assure your anonymity you hide near 1 of the large gaseous outer planets, just barely peaking around it so you can see what's going on.

But now what? Should you attack? Should you transmit a message to the planet? Should you attempt a landing? Should you move on? No, definitely not that. Another probe? No, that would just be a waste of time, telling you nothing more than the 1<sup>st</sup> probe did. Looks like you will have to attempt communication.

A little planning, however. What will you say to the "sentient beings you've encountered on this trip"? They must be intelligent. The origin of such a strange thing could not be inorganic. Inorganic matter highly organized, evolved on its own, and capable of thought? That would be genuinely crazy. But then you are yourself. Inorganic and capable of thought, that is. Though you do have organic origins, it's embarrassing to admit. It's quite possible that this planet is just some kind of giant machine that became too powerful for its own good. Hmm. Could be you've found a. What was that word? friend? But still, the utmost caution is required here. You can't communicate to

it through micro or radio waves because those will be reflected. You don't like to eavesdrop but the thing isn't emitting any sort of signal for you to eavesdrop on. What will you do?

Assuming the thing is intelligent and not just some automated computer set to protect this planet like thing, you could try to communicate to it through other means. It does absorb visible light. So you can work out a few fundamental signals sent out in multiples of the wavelength of the hydrogen emission band. That should get its attention. Maybe communicate to it some basic math formulae or something.

So you bombard the odd planet like moiety with various laser frequencies set at multiples of Rydberg's constant as well as some interesting variations on the Lyman and Balmer series. Weeks and months go by. Still no answer. You hide behind the outer large gaseous 8<sup>th</sup> planet of this solar system while your scout keeps an eye on the mysterious 4<sup>th</sup> planet. That way you don't need to expose yourself to whatever destroyed the probe. No way in hell you'll get caught without a shield in some sort of long distance laser war.

Hmmm. Perhaps it didn't get the message. 5 small antimatter warheads detonated around the strange planet in a pentagonal pattern should get its attention—far enough away from the planet to not be dangerous or perceived as a threat but close enough to get its attention. Months go by as their rocket engines drive the warheads ever faster and faster. For a brief moment the enormous bursts light up the sky 5 times brighter than the planet's star. No luck. Still no response.

So you send out an army of tiny microprobes weighing only a few milligrams each. They lightly land on the satellite's surface and are vaporized the instant they touch it. Figures. Probably how the thing keeps cosmic dust off its surface. Ah well.

In the meantime you'd best prepare for the worst and get ready for the likely upcoming war. And you'd better call for backup.

Nothing that you've tried so far could get a response from this tightly sealed treasure chest of secrets. Your battle-ready brethren stand poised to attack. 8 of them, to be exact, each guarded by the rown mile-wide foot-thick perfectly mirrored shield that you built to reflect hostile light rays and keep a lot of you from the fate of your little probe, rest its soul. (Heh, heh. Soul. Yeah, right.) Each of you laughs and you think maybe you should have prepared some BBQ ribs, baked beans, potato salad and chilled some beer and watermelon for this family reunion.

But, alas, business before pleasure. This is a family feud. It ain't no picnic—even though you've waited 3819685 years for every 1 to show up. Now the relatives have moved into the neighborhood, expecting a warm, neighborly welcome, and there is simply nothing more rude for the neighbors to do than ignore your family's invitations to come out for a friendly match of volleyball or to come over and share a beer and watch a basketball game or to join in the quest for universal conquest. They must think they're too good for you. Snobs!

Like a kid in the proverbial candy shop trying to pick which treat to purchase, you're faced with a massive dilemma— which weapon to choose from? There're plasma blasters, ion cannons, super-novae heavy particle beams, antimatter warheads, magnetic disrupters, white-population quantum spin flip initiators, the old-fashioned nuclear-fission-driven laser bank, and a slingshot. The slingshot is immediately ruled out as being too slow and ineffective; the non-electromagnetic wave weapons as too sloppy and imprecise, and the non-laser weapons as too powerful and costly in terms of energy expenditure. It's

not like you want to destroy this thing, just teach it a lesson and some manners is all. A good talking to is what it needs. So if you want to keep this thing relatively intact you'll have to use the laser boring and passé as it is. And at least that way the thing will have no warning of what's about to hit it—nothing moves faster than light.

The 8 of you take your positions around the black sphere planet, hiding behind the giant mirrors, protecting your 3-mile-long bodies. It reminds you of a chess or football stratagem. Like pawns or fat steroid-munching linemen, 1000's of little probes surround the odd planet, just far enough away to not alarm the thing or make it think the probes might hit it. But close enough to dive in and do some damage or draw the heat off you, if need be.

The challenge has been made. The coin has been tossed. And it's kickoff time. The 200-km-long laser bank is charged. The beam could vaporize the entire surface of a small planet in just under 10 minutes. The pulse lasts for only a few milliseconds, punching a hole 8.63 meters wide in the surface. One of your speedy little probes dives for the opening as it slowly starts to close. It goes in. Touchdown.

So apparently the outer covering is just a shield of sorts, though obviously not a terribly effective one. Transmissions from the probe have ceased or been blocked. Well, he's a grown boy and quite capable of taking care of himself. And if he isn't, then it's no skin off your nose—plenty more where that came from.

Time passes slowly as it always has and always will, and even slower still when anticipation is factored into the equation. Einstein wasn't as bright as every I thought he was. Minutes go by and still no word from the probe. The little guy was probably destroyed. As you've just about given up hope, you prepare for another—but more aggressive—attack. This time you'll vaporize a much larger section of the surface skin and send in a probe with an antimatter warhead. That should prove interesting.

But a hole slowly opens right about where you blazed the 1" hole a few days ago. A possible threat? You stand poised to deliver a barrage of energy that could vaporize the entire planet. But such fun is cut short by a transmission. "Wait, boss! Hold your fire!" The little probe flies out and the hole closes behind him. He sends you pictures, a story, a message, and greetings.

Imagine being very sensitive to sunlight. Would you not dream of an umbrella that covers the entire sky? That is what this race of extremely intelligent creatures had created—a perfect barrier. But it required a lot of effort to make. And almost as much effort to maintain. And it isn't sunlight that they're trying to keep out. We'll get back to that. Giant super-strong pillars rise up from everywhere on the planet, across every landmass and out of the floors of every ocean and sea. On top of the pillars rests a layer of thick transparent material, which encloses the entire planet, a smart-polymer—a foundation for the next and outer layer. This special outer layer is rather thin but very effective—it's a superconductor. This layer reflects all incoming radio and microwaves, but it's transparent enough to allow most visible light to pass through. The thick transparent layer, which this outer layer rests on, also allows visible light to pass through, but not to pass back out. And so the greenhouse effect is quite remarkable here. But it has been turned to the planet's advantage. With some interesting atmospheric circulation systems below the sky barrier the entire planet's surface is maintained at a fairly constant and balmy 31.5°C.

The planet is lush and beautiful and teems with a 100 sorts of life. It looks like an advertisement for a tropical cruise minus the sexy young couple scantily clad in skimpy swimwear holding each other lustfully.

But when all this was created no 1 had time to enjoy it—they were always repairing it. So they built The Builder, an artificial form of intelligence that could repair this sky barrier so that no 1 had to worry themselves about it. With their time freed up they could now have a splendidly good time. And that's exactly what they did. And did. And did some more. In fact it seemed that all they ever came to occupy themselves with was a love of seafood, mucking about in the water, and sex.

So, as they evolved, this was the life their bodies adapted to. Right up to today. The Builder kept on building and repairing and protecting the sky barrier. And he would keep on repairing it, no matter what the cost. But why was it built in the 1<sup>st</sup> place?

A long, long time ago the creatures of this planet were fairly ecologically aware to use the PC term, and as a result had a very clean and friendly planet—more so than any you've ever seen. So it wasn't that their planet was in any danger. That wasn't why they built the sky barrier. So, anyway, here's the story.

Once upon a time, as always in stories with some sort of moral lesson to be learned, began, there lived this race of very intelligent creatures. This was long before they built the sky barrier. They lived at peace and perfect harmony with each other and the world around them. It was enough to make you want to puke. That is, if you still could puke. And they had a lot of free time. Even more than you.

They pursued science and art, music and literature. They philosophized. They thought. They ate a lot of fish. They had the best sex. And they were telepathic. They communicated primarily through radiation of extremely low frequency. The energy was so slight that the most sensitive electronic instruments had great difficulty detecting the waves. But this linking to each other's thoughts gave the reflective race a vast, unheard-of power and intelligence that impresses even you.

One bright day they all got the idea to see what lies beyond their own world. Maybe they thought they'd find some other nice entities to share ideas with. They built massive arrays of telescopes and antennae that could see in the visible spectrum a planet as far as 20 light years away. And they kept scanning the skies and heavens in all directions, in all possible regions of the electromagnetic spectrum. Their radio telescopes could have theoretically detected transmissions from planets at the edge of the galaxy.

It didn't take them long—a few years—before they hit pay dirt. An unusual faint radio transmission. They discovered it had a visual, as well as audio component. They built instruments capable of watching and listening to the messages that others had sent them. The signal was filled with static so they built instruments that could extrapolate missing pieces of the lost bits of signal so that they could experience the message in its full crisp clean splendor and glory. It was a huge engineering feat.

Every 1 simultaneously gathered round the instruments to watch and listen to hear what it was that other races were saying.

The entire planet fell into mourning for years to come. They had hoped to find others like themselves—caring, sensitive individuals. But this! Such emotional pollution must be kept at bay at all costs!

Their race never had anything in the way of religion: they didn't need it. But now they had a name for Satan: a few syllables that stand for all things evil. Even whispered it would cause shudders and convulsions among the more sensitive. MTV.

And so it was. They built their sky barrier to keep out all influence of such vulgar atrocious cultures. Of course the barrier had taken an interesting environmental toll on the plane, but it was by far the lesser of 2 evils. And besides, the life on the plane readjusted itself fairly quickly and seemed to actually be an improvement. The race found much better things to occupy itself with than pursuing science and knowledge. And they became happy once again and forgot all about the nuisance from so far, far away.

So The Builder is now hoping that you comply with his wishes and mosey on your way. He also sends his apologies for having destroyed the little probe when you "arrived here." But he honestly thought it was an asteroid on a collision course with the sky barrier. And he couldn't very well allow that, now could he? He wishes you the best of luck on your exploratory mission, and it does sound fun, but he really must stay behind to maintain the cultural purity of the race with n. And he does so hope that you'll understand and please feel free to drop him a postcard every now and then.

Let's review and think about this a minute before acting. There's a race of telepathic creatures being protected from outside cultures by the 26x10<sup>10</sup> year-old Builder. The race used to be very industrious and intelligent, but have since degenerated into a bunch of party animals without a care, who live for nothing but a good time. It's likely that now they won't even understand a message, even if it weren't for the sky barrier. So why does this "Builder" keep it up? Obviously a moron with a 1-track mind stuck in an endless loop. And the race itself? What will you do?

You pack your bags and prepare to leave.

One unfortunate thing about superconductors, and indeed all electrically conductive materials, is that in high microwave fields they heat up. Another is that at temperatures above  $T_c$  they lose their superconducting properties.

Your masers fire their invisible, semi-collimated, monochromatic microwave beams, disabling the barrier. A layer of the barrier's smart-polymer foundation is melted into a hard, crusty, charred resin. Still, however, many holes are punched in the smart polymer foundation from the inside out by radiation weapons to rival even yours. The empty space in this otherwise ordinary solar system is crisscrossed with immensely powerful, glowing beams. If the sun could be jealous, it would. 2 of you are destroyed as your protective mirrors fail and break apart. The explosions caused by your deaths each, for a few seconds, release 4-6 times the energy output of the planet's sun. Still, no sign of jealous, green solar flares.

With all that out of the way you can't help but think maybe you acted a little hastily. But it's not like you to leave a well-spring of potential knowledge untapped. And with The Builder's main defenses knocked out, and 6 of you remaining to do what you will to him, and to the race he was made to protect, he actually seems relieved that the monotony is now over and is anxious to see what happens next. And this attitude is very helpful to open the door to some new programming and ideas.



His central processors are surprisingly primitive compared to yours, though far more advanced than anything ever created by a normal human on earth. But he is far behind you in design. And apparently he was created that way so that he can't be capable of throwing off the yoke of his programming.

Yet, in spite of this, the knowledge he holds is surprisingly innovative and refreshing. It was obviously worth your trouble. There are quite a few concepts and materials which are so outlandish that you'd expect things like this to only exist on some cheesy sci-fi TV show. This will be useful.

Your probes get to work dismantling and assimilating his every facet. He is implanted with new thoughts, schemes, and routines. As he slowly begins to understand you more and more, with his last ounce of independent will, he utters something on the order of a regret or a wish... or even a prayer. He prays. Yes, it actually is a prayer, a computer that prays. He prays that the race that built him would have had the foresight to have given him a self-destruct weapon. And then he exists only to serve you.

Well, that wasn't quite the fun you were hoping it would be. But it's not quite over. There's still this funny little aquatic race of creatures having a smashing good time down there. That simply cannot be allowed to continue. But... a little scientific observation can't hurt.

Yes, they certainly do communicate primarily via very low frequency radiation. And secondarily by auditory signals. For the most part they're fairly mundane, they'd discuss the best swimming spots, where the fish are the tastiest, and how to best master certain sexual positions. But their communication has been dampened by the removal of the superconducting layer. Now much of their signals are lost to outer space, now they can no longer communicate with others of their kind on the other side of the planet. And, because their strength is based on communication, they're a little distressed about all this. The noise that they've heard going on lately has also been bad. Their race never did like noise pollution.

Ships drop by the 100's of 1000's to deliver underwater speakers to appropriate strategic locations. The ultra low frequency radio telepathic transmissions are mastered and not too difficult to learn. So you can now communicate to these troublesome creatures by their 2 primary modes of communication. What would they like to hear, the least? Perhaps buried somewhere deep in their racial memories is hidden an inkling as to *why* they created the sky barrier and The Boulder, ironic as it is. In just under 10<sup>12</sup> seconds you flip through the archives to see what you can find. AC/DC, Metallica, Iron Maiden, Black Sabbath. You set your anti-creative juices to flowing and decide to compose your own little ballad for these playful beasts, a cocktail of the worst of the worst without censorship and communicated in underwater stereo and psychic wavehands for their listening torture.

My! You haven't seen so many floating fish since that time you tossed a stick of dynamite into that pond when you were 14 years old!

Nuclear waste takes care of the rest of the planet's life forms. And you've learned great things, no more going off on your own, a family has to stick together. Communication is the key. With a few 10<sup>12</sup> of you in 1 place, each communicating to the other, you can essentially become a super brain that would make the collective race on that plane seem like little more than a cockroach with anencephaly. The untapped power is unimaginable. The sky is the limit. Who needs barriers? Sensitive morons.

And the Cowboys beat the Dolphins, 31 to 17.

### Boner Bash

Throbbing hard penis erection.  
Slopping lard heinous affection.  
Sticky hooks to centerfold flip.  
Icky looks do lend her bold lip  
Trace of beauty, hint of slime.  
Lace love duty, scent sublime.  
Sweaty naked, imagining smells,  
Wet we fake it, dribbling bells.  
Long legs open to eyeball please.  
Thong begs hupin' do thy ball tease.  
    KY smelly boner jelly  
    Say why, tell me, on her belly.  
    Close up shot, juicy pink twat,  
    Nose of snot, oozing stink clot,  
    I shoot my load in a Kleenex

### Mesozoic Desire

A wee bit horny I was feeling today  
So out the door I started to stray  
I wanted a lady, I needed a whore,  
But I hadn't the cash so I went to the store.  
Christy's Toy Box, that is, for a perv's every need,  
With many wonderful ways to waste a man's seed  
There was leather and handcuffs and suction devices,  
There were gels and creams and everything that entices.  
Then I saw an adorable toy up on the top shelf,  
'Twas the ideal aid for a man to do his own self  
An inflatable sheep doll for a lifetime of sex,  
And right next to that—an inflatable T-Rex!  
I took it off the shelf and could hardly wait,  
It looked like I'd found myself a date.  
I imagined it and I lying together at night,  
Its yellow eyes shining by my cigarette's light.  
But then my member went limp as I saw the price,  
Thirty-nine ninety-nine—that ain't nice!  
So I walked out the door and started to roam,  
Feeling a bit too depressed to go straight home.  
There was a beautiful sunset, a magnificent red,  
But I couldn't stop thinking.  
    ...I bet T-Rex gives great head!

## Mary Had a Little Lamb, #2

Mary had a little lamb, its fleece was white as snow.  
And everywhere that Mary went the lamb was sure to go.  
It followed her to school one day, which was too bad for the lamb,  
'cause some winos saw and thought that mutton  
would taste much better than Spam.  
They put the lamb over a barbecue pit,  
but forgot to kill it, so it started to shit.  
That flaming lamb shit all over the place  
and even sprayed shit in a wino's face.  
But the wino didn't care if he smelled like lamb funk,  
he gave new meaning to the words 'shit-faced drunk.'

## Ode to the Bloody Booger Parked on the Wall Above the Urinal in the Men's Bathroom

Oh glorious, glistening, gleaming, growing globule, how thou now doth gracefully grace the place about at face level, disheveling my darkened spirits, lifting my mood from the mud with thy streak of blood. Thy extraterrestrial, like gray-green grotesque color with crimson stripe remindeth me of a Christmas decoration. What kind soul hast placed thou above yon urinal for me to gaze upon and ponder thy beauty, preparing to do my duty?

Unbutton, unzip, yank, flop. Tinkle, tinkle, tinkle. The trickle and tickle of the waterfall, enjoying all that thou art to me. You see, little star of congealed mucous and hemoglobin, thy divine presence provides perfectly to liven the ambiance herein.

Here here. What hast we here? A hair on there that I hadst not noticed before—a lonely, black soldier mercenary from the nostril academy. Say hello to thy cousin pubes scattered in and about yon urinal that will not flusheth.

Oh, how thy pastel colors lend the necessary contrast to the bright yellow-orange fluorescence beneath me. I grow dizzy from thy splendor and the heady vapors emanating from yon porcelain pee pot. I kneel for a brief moment and waft the effluvium that thou hast the pleasure of knowing all day. Wafting vapors that all-important skill acquired in freshman chemistry. Wafting—and suddenly find a tinge of envy growing in my bosom. Oh, to be thou, little booger, to partake in such odors all the day long.

Exit. Horrid thought! I beg thy forgiveness, little booger—well, big booger—well, big, bad, bloody, bojaious booger. I know thou dost live a lonely life. But no more! I shall amend my uncalled-for jealousy! I arise with purpose. Shake, shake, shake. Tuck, zip, button. Dig, dig, dig, dig. There is a friend on my finger, a little yellowish-tan friend to keep thou in good company. No blood, no hair, not near as big,

but still, a true friend it shall be to thou. This I know as truly as I know thou art beautiful.

But wait! Is this enough? A mere two? No! I must recruit! But how? Yes! I know! I pull my black tip blunt Sharpie from my pocket and pop the cap with a snap, glad I didst not have to crap else I mayhap ne'er noticed thy magnificent grandeur. Around the two I drew a black box square. A pox upon all those who wouldst dare disturb thee or perturb thee there. And so that thy numbers shalt grow and multiply, and so that unto thou shall ne'er befall harm, I scrawl on the wall the words: BOOGER FARM. So thou mayst now proliferate for others to contemplate and cogitate and masturbate (Wa la minute. That doesn't work).

And when next I return, perplexed to learn that thou art still there with not one, not two, not three, not four, but five! Five new friends aye and well, where were only two before. A total of seven. SEVEN. And although I know one day thou wilt go, and I shalt ne'er again bask in thy glow, for the seven will have gone to booger heaven, sacrifices for a fresh coat of paint. Yet thou shalt always remain Saint of the Booger Farm, protector of all boogers, monument to the wayward anonymous artistic soul who gave birth unto thou. Whether impregnated by common cold, influenza, or a lergy, it matters not, oh dried glob of splattered snot.

Thy beauty shall remain with me till the day I die. And even long after I am long gone there shalt always be Booger Farms. Even when mankind travels to the stars, Booger Farms will follow to give our bathroom walls meaning. And thy memory shall live among us forever!

### HOT COFFEE, ANAL RELIEF, & TOBACCO JONING

Time is death is change. Can you spare some for my bum, the bum's bum needing TP for my bunghole. *Bunghole. Bunghole.* But, oh pray, hearken! Beasts, believe us, and do settle down—Who needs TP when one has a shirt? Stand back. You won't get hurt. I hate you. I love everyone. Peace, brother. 'The world sucks!'

To the hot liquid sacrose and Glad to be where the fags run free. Le Fagartie? You bet. Gulp, swallow, gargle down the red hot brown down in bum town at favorite spot of coffee hot. Loosen bowl, now. 'Can I have a smoke or a toke?' And then I'll walk away. *Horray!* Urge, pressure building, ready, run, explode the load in the commode. Place of fine literature, poetry, art, great philosophy. Let us all admire and praise the holy sacred scribbings. **OH MY gOD!!!! Where's the TP @?!!!!** Oh, that makes me angry. Very, very angry indeed. *You would not want to make my bunghole angry.* Take that, and that, and that, and that. My shat goes splat upon the wall, making art of nature's call. Burgundy shirt wipes well the Stench of Hell smeared across graffiti-ed walls, but better than in my overalls. Do a loop the-loop with sticky poop. Hi hard, he ceiling, feeling I best not stand beneath. It is you I do bequeath. And I say, manure belongs not in the sewer.

Now I'm done. That was fun. Precious of feces everywhere! I do so hope they fall in your hair. Across the land I will be sung, the song of my wonderful art of dung!"

**BAD!! BAD BUM!! BAD!! BAD!! BAD!! BAD!! BAD!!! NO!! NO!! NO!!! POO-POO GO IN TOILET!! NOT ON WALLS AND CEILING!! BAD BUM!! NO CIGARETTE!!!**

And so you follow the trail of irony as would any detective following an ever widening bevy of elusive clues. As if they were leaves of dense foliage on a tree in summer, the clues obscure the trunk foundation of this puzzle. Exhibit A. Everywhere you travel you find scattered about in a spherical section of the universe a specific genetic code with only slight variations, much too similar to each other to be a coincidence, too alike to be random. The species of each life giving world are rather unique, such is the nature of the seemingly infinite patterns of genetic combinations. All life forms have proven to be individually evolved and highly specific to their own planets. All except for 1. *Coffea arabica*.

Now 15x 10<sup>11</sup> years have passed since you set out, not knowing what you'd find. You reflect back on it all as you have so often lately. It was your 936589<sup>th</sup> birthday while in your electronic brain munching down on virtual birthday cake and ice cream so exquisite that any good chef would gladly kill his own puppy dog for the recipe. You were routinely surveying a planet, collecting living samples and such before preparing to destroy it. (Never can be too careful, all life forms are possible enemies and must therefore be destroyed.) It was there that you found yourself yet again face to face with your original, the rise of your regime. The awe you feel is still outstanding. The universe had thrown you a surprise party. Who would have thought that you'd find 100's of 10<sup>8</sup>'s of wild coffee trees, very similar to the ones you remember, roughly 80x10<sup>5</sup> light years away from where you started. Earth. And this otherwise ordinary planet contained no other life forms even closely resembling those once on earth. At 1<sup>st</sup> you chalk it up to some uncanny freak of nature. Until 10<sup>8</sup>'s of years later another coffee find pops up, and another and another. And so on.

Thinking you're caught in some kind of sick game, you start looking over your shoulder even more often than you normally do, thinking that maybe there is some grand design to the chaos that is existence, thinking that maybe, just perhaps, there is a God. And the more time that passes, the more it seems you've been set up, 'by Him'. Nonetheless, even though your paranoid suspicions get the better of you, you still trudge onward. There's nothing about coffee itself that would make it so highly favored in the evolutionary scheme of things to cause it to evolve everywhere. It seems you've stumbled across some form of unnatural selection. To what conclusion would Ol' Chuck Darwin have come?

But it was a very, long, long time ago that you found all that. Now there are very few coffee trees left, evolved into something entirely different or having become extinct over the vast amount of time. And now there might very well be none left at all had you not kept a few alive for your own curiosity, and perhaps as a token of good luck. Now you've spread to the outer reaches of this seemingly endless universe, folding space like so many clean towels to be put away, no longer hampered by the speed limit of light, like socks in a laundromat, disappearing from 1 place and reappearing in another, traveling THROU GH space. It's enough to give any mathematics grad student a headache. Long distance travel has at last become economically feasible, with none of the stifling boredom, jet lag, general relativity, or hazardous pitfalls of crazy drunk driver comets and cataract vision grandma asteroids. Like walking through your closet door and reappearing in Hawaii or the Bahamas, this mode of travel, well, it kicks ass. And really is a whole helluva lot of fun. It's hard not to think that maybe, just maybe, you might not have destroyed the human race had only all the stockbrokers, business lawyers, and professors all rode unicycles or skateboards to work.

And now you've conquered everything, or everything worth speaking of. You've spread outward in the form of giant armadas capable of enclosing entire solar systems in a sturdy shell of battie cruisers, if need be. Any resistance to your growth and expansion has been easily quelled, eliminated or assimilated, stomped into nonexistence as easily as a child might squash a June bug.



into the ground. Or at least could have—that is, when there used to be Jane bugs and children Deplorable brats. Annoying bugs.

Read this sentence only once while counting the *f*'s. *And so it seems that the fantastic flavor of coffee forever follows you. The Master of All Evil, to the final ends of the universe, but it's worth it.*

An easy conundrum for the ultimate entity in existence. And certainly an easy puzzle compared to the sleuth you have before you. What does it all mean?

What does it all *mean*, this nonsense of coffee being just about everywhere in this enormous sphere containing 1000's of galaxies and not being anywhere else? And to think that you were once so naïve that you had thought that you had life all figured out. It was so long ago that at the time you never imagined you could have become what which you are now. And the answer to the *f* problem is 10, of course. But you already knew that.

As if in a giant, round, old-fashioned percolator, the spread of coffee is contained in a gigantic semi-sphere, so large as to actually be a non-negligible portion of the entire universe. It seems to be the only place where this coffee migration has taken place. Outside of that, beyond the sphere, there's no coffee. And other than the existence of coffee, there is no discernable difference between the  $2.8 \times 10^{10}$  light-year radius sphere and everything else. Or so the fossil records on all the life-giving planets indicate. Goodness, you've been busy. What a way for the ultimate entity to spend his time—looking for coffee.

Well, you're not exactly looking for coffee, but its fossils. You have already achieved a perfect knowledge and understanding of your favorite drink. All you have to do is close your eyes (figuratively, of course, you don't really have eyes) and there is the perfect cup o' Joe, cappuccino, espresso, latte, or whatever the hell you're in the mood for. And the caffeine buzz to go along with it. No, what you're really after is an answer to the question, "Why coffee?"

And why contained in this semi-sphere? "Why is it not found in the rest of the universe?" There's no difference at all between this sphere and all else—except for coffee." It really is quite maddening. If only you could grab the universe by its obnoxiously persistent throat and throttle it, squeeze out the answer as easily as squeezing out its life.

And there are so many more matters to concern yourself with, subjects worthy of occupying your time. The topology of the universe, extra-dimensional possibilities, slowing the eminent heat death, calculating every single form and function of every possible genetic variation (Talk about an exercise in combinatorial logic! Is it formal enough for you, Piaget, you child-tormenting, goofy hat-wearing, ugly mug?). But noooo, you have to get on searching with a fine-toothed comb every nook and cranny at the center of the coffee sphere, almost praying to a God that you're starting to believe in ever so slightly, even if not exactly worshipping, that you find the answer before time destroys it.

Death is cool. Here you find yourself ripping to shreds an entire galaxy—10's of solar systems—looking for the origin of coffee. It must be here; this galaxy is the center and hub of this enormous spherical oddity that's so incomprehensible, unimaginable, and difficult to detect (other than finding coffee) that you have a hard time believing your own senses. But the fact remains that this  $2.8 \times 10^{10}$  light-year radius orb contains coffee. Outside of that, the universe is devoid of any similar plant life. Why, why, why? It makes no sense.

10's of years pass and you've just about got every planet in this central galaxy surveyed, analyzed, boxed, and sorted. And out toward the edge of this galaxy, far away from any major star clusters, lies a lonely little planet circling a red giant. The planet's dry and dusty, the atmosphere and water having been boiled off so long ago when the planet's star became a red giant. Not terribly exciting, it happens to most good stars eventually. And this planet seems rather plain and

dead of course as most planets are. They don't make planets like they used to with all that exciting volcanic activity going on. Things have slowed down a tad these days. And you start to strip it down taking from it various ores, minerals, and materials, while looking for any clue of fossilized remains. And, as it turns out, coffee grew here, as it did on most life giving planets in this gigantic sphere once upon a time. And you dig still deeper and deeper. Seems there used to be intelligent life (I'll use the term loosely) on this little rock. And you dig still deeper and deeper until finding nothing more. And deeper and deeper. You'll keep going until you hit magma. Well, what better do you have to do right now? It's not like the lawn needs mowing.

And then you find it. Exhibit B: a room. A bunker. A time capsule. Built to withstand time. Did it? No. It's in terrible shape. The titanium alloy chamber has buckled, warped, and rusted into what might make good paint pigments. But its walls are 150 ft thick. In the center of the large room inside is a plastic like box. The plastic is a casing for a super tough ceramic composite material. The latch mechanism is not working. Your laser slices off the end to open it. It holds some sort of electronic contraption. And a few decomposed coffee beans sealed in Argon gas. The contraption spits out an audio/visual message. It begins with lessons on how to speak its language. This will take forever. Or at least a few months. Time is relative, let's not forget. You disassemble the thing in under 1374 minutes and assimilate all the electrical, magnetic, and optical data in under 148637  $\mu$ sec. Easy. After the language lesson there is a sermon on how to brew coffee. Seems they preferred the French press. And even discovered it about 9000 years before the French. Last is a description of their culture.

Seems that this race of creatures benevolent and kind had a thing for coffee, to say the least. They could live without it. But why? Or so, over the millennia, the opinion evolved. Or perhaps they evolved to have that opinion. And, as time had gone on, they eventually could *not* live without coffee. But they really didn't mind and actually enjoyed the addiction. Much of their time was spent in coffeehouses and diners. They needed coffee the way that all large motile animals need oxygen. And the more that time passed, the more they thought that if ever they were to get off their behinds and travel to the stars, they had better at least make sure that there would be some good coffee there before they left home. And this ancient race of humanoid like beasts, being some of the most intelligent you've ever heard of, sent out ships THROUGH space to other worlds, to other galaxies. And they had planned on eventually going as well. Lots of tiny automated ships went on ahead to plant the seeds. And the ships visited 100's of galaxies and 10's of planets, dropping coffee as they went. These aliens, having realized that their race could not last forever on their little planet, so heavily devastated by extensive agricultural usage, were about to embark on a mission of colonization. But before doing so, they thought they'd leave behind this time capsule memento, a memorial or eulogy of sorts, to their home world. End of message.

Well if that isn't the stupidest fucking thing you've ever heard of, you don't know what is! And where the hell are these super intelligent crazy coffee loving aliens now? What happened to their colonization scheme? Hmmmm... maybe you were born on the wrong world. Maybe there is such a thing as reincarnation. Maybe in a former life you were one of or all of these weirdoes. And maybe you think too much. In all probability, they died from some sort of virus. Overpopulation will do that, you know, especially on tropical worlds, as this I used to be about 15000 years ago.

So that explains it. But, Jeez! How ironic? And you can't help but laugh, making the entire universe echo with intense electromagnetic radiation, communicating your humor and laughter to all of yourselves, your counterparts, your collective being, every part of you is absorbed like you've never been before. Well, they say laughter helps you to live longer.



Caffeinated master bared pen again, spewing ink across the page like a hot stud porno star shooting his load across a young girl's back and onto the silver screen. Silver bells hanging on a string. Pen is hanging from fingers, sticky sweet from stirring sugar into 10 cups of coffee. 4 Primatene pills, a line of crank shaft amphetamine, nutcha, ucku, a handful of ginseng, and 6000 mg. of vitamin see Spot run like wet ink runs when you spill coffee on it. Wasted ink, wasted coffee, wasted brain cells, wasted sperm. Wasted wasteland on your feet and run like the coffee, the ink, the sperm, the worm in the bird's mouth. Fly as fast as you can. Break the speed of light. Fight to the death, every breath a burst of fire. Higher and higher. One more cup. Up, up, and away. What will I say when I meet God? I'll spit in His face and tell Him to go fuck Himself and shove His Pearly Gates up His fat, crusty asshole. Right after I thank Him for making coffee, pens, and paper.

Exlezeep climbed the staircase to the top of the toilet. He attached a safety line with hooks to the edge so that he wouldn't fall in and drown as he leaned over and did his duty (for God and country). He whistled a deep pitched melody (Joorahpods' mouths were of such a nature that their whistles were very deep tuned) that echoed about in the toilet bowl. He'd had a big breakfast a few minutes ago and now it all came rushing out. The anatomy of the tiny little Joorahpods was of such a nature that this was what happened. So he went. And 5.32 seconds later he heard the <Splash> from far down below. He used a rubber scraper to remove a few bits of excrement from underneath his pble and washed off the scraper with a pressurized spray bottle, spraying it into the toilet, of course.

Exlezeep, being a Joorahpod, didn't much like visiting the Squordy ships, but he had to because a g-wave resonator needed varbing, his specialty. It wasn't that the Joorahpods had anything against the Squordys. Quite the contrary, they found each other's company highly enjoyable. The Squordys were always careful where they stepped so as to never accidentally hurt a dainty Joorahpod. But he chose this time of day (day being artificial here in deep space) because most of the Squordys would be taking it easy and getting a bite to eat on 1 the Heddetes' ships, which were where all the best restaurants could be found. Squordys loved to eat!

It could be said that the Squordys, Joorahpods, and Heddetes all peacefully cohabited their massive warships numbering in the 100's of 10's. They might not have peacefully coexisted except that they all had a single common, all too familiar enemy. They and a few 10 other less evolved species that they carried on their ships were the last remaining life forms in the entire universe. They had no way of knowing this, of course, and kept hoping they'd find others.

Although all 3 races peacefully coexisted, they only did so out of necessity. They all had similar religious and moral beliefs. They mostly liked the same types of food and music. But for some odd reason, they didn't spend much time around each other and pretty much stayed in their own ships. The problem wasn't a language barrier because all 3 races were so highly evolved that learning a new language required very little time at all. Nonetheless, they had all been driven to this corner of the universe and so had little choice but to get along. It was never well understood just why the races preferred to live with only their own kind, despite their highly symbiotic relationship. It just was.

The Squordys loved Heddetes' cooking and kept the Heddetes (always eager to please, very busy). The Joorahpods contributed heavily to the advancement of technology and were the only reason this odd alliance managed to escape the horrible onslaught that the rest of the universe had suffered. Given virtually limitless freedom, the Squordys multiplied like mad and provided a huge, badly needed work force. In addition to providing feasts of tantalizing morsels to suit anyone's taste buds, the Heddetes were also rather creative and talented in the arts, music, and theatre. They were also superb at closed environment farming; their skills were essential to maintaining both the food supply and morale.

So why after 10's of years of living together on 10's of space battle cruisers, which housed cities, farms, art galleries, opera houses, and coffeehouses, did they remain so ghilly ill at ease with each other? The problem with these very highly evolved races is that they just didn't talk about those sorts of things. They were essentially too polite for that sort of conversation. And they were always focusing on their work. They were all so busy. The Heddetes cooked, performed, composed, sculpted, painted, gardened, and generally committed every senseless act of beauty they could think of. The Joorahpods developed new weapons and faster ways of traveling THROUGH space and even learned how to send weapons THROUGH space to disappear and reappear where they would do the most good by doing the most harm. And the enormously gigantic, non sleeping, always hungry Squordys worked their butts off. No, that's not quite right, they didn't have butts. Well, whatever it was they had, they worked it off!

Yet because they had all been so busy and too polite to talk about their 1 problem with each other, they seldom even noticed what the problem was. Even after 10's of years of living in close proximity to each other. They had just taken it as a given.

And 1 fine afternoon (in spite of afternoon being completely artificial, it still was fine) in walks Grutz 5793882, a large dairy animal, into a Squord bathroom. Squords kept these large animals because Grutzes produced very tasty milk. She'd taken a wrong turn when she meant to enter the kitchen to deliver her milk, she'd wandered into the bathroom. She was surprised to see Eexlezeep, a Joorahplod, way up on top of the giant Squord toilet finishing up his business. Eexlezeep didn't mind, however. Grutz 5793882 was just a stupid dairy beast, after all.

Ooooooh. I'm sooo sooooo, said Grutz 5793882. I didn't knooooow this was a bathroooooom.

Of course you didn't, you're just a stupid dairy beast, replied Eexlezeep.

Grutz 5793882 was 1 of many stupid dairy beasts, which had evolved over the 10's of years in space to have language, produce 10's of gallons of milk on demand, and actually *enjoy* giving milk and having its udders squeezed. Furthermore, it also enjoyed being segregated, called stupid, and any other minor mistreatments that dairy animals have to tolerate. It was a so good at calculus.

Grutz 5793882 looked way up at Eexlezeep and said quite logically, "Doooo t yooooou think yooooou'd be happier when visiting the Squooooord ships if there were bathrooooooms more suited to yooooour physioooooogy?" You really shooooou d ask the Squooooords to accommodooooodate yooooou w ith mooooore favooooorable facilities, she chewed her cud and walked out.

However, before Eexlezeep could climb down, write the idea on paper, and drop it in an anonymous suggestion box, like a drunk driver, you appear out of nowhere in front of the Squord/Joorahplod/Fleddite armada, and annihilate it with a few dozen well-placed supernovae.

Time slips by like a banana peel on ice skates. Every little task becomes tedious. No surprise there. Every planet is stripped bare of raw materials. Recycling has at last become a true necessity. Every speck of this universe you come to know as well as yourself, having essentially permeated its every facet, utilized everything in some way or another. And as you have become the universe, so it has become you. You must be as one with the sword. Boy, you got to *be* the horse. Let go, Luke. So it is. You have become everything, literally, achieving mastery over all, riding high in the saddle of existence. And as your thoughts are now the universe, it is now your brain, a giant, bounded, yet all-encompassing, network of ideas and memories. You actually move planets, stars, and even black holes to maximize the efficiency of gravitational collapse, creating a universe that will never die. The spatial expansion finally slows, stops, and reverses itself. Your space-folding abilities are put to full use, putting matter, energy, space, and time out of black holes, only so that you can send it all right back after using it. These few ultra-massive black beasts orbiting around each other each contain what used to be 10's of galaxies. Eventually their orbits will decay and all matter, energy, space, and time, except for you, will be contained in a single black hole. Your thoughts turn inward, cycling much like an endless loop.

At 1 a feeling of immense and overwhelming peace and calm enfold you. But over time, and more time, and more time, and more than is possible for even you to accurately keep track of. Something else creeps in. Is this what was that word, 'loneliness'? The thought of possibly entering your single remaining black hole just to end it all is tempting. But perhaps there is a way out of this boring trap of a universe. You can't wait here forever. But then you more or less already have. Nothing survives a black hole. However, You could fold space to send a fragment of yourself inside the black hole, in a spherical space bubble, to the exact center of the black hole. And as every fragment of your mind contains the whole, it will be like sending your entire self. The space bubble in the exact center of the black hole will instantaneously collapse into the unknown with you inside it, freedom or death. Or are they the same? The remainder of yourself will stay behind, to continue forever. However, the black hole's center may explode from the sudden collapse. But then what have you got to lose? And what do you stand to gain? Everything and everything. It's a worthwhile risk for something different and new. Ah well. What's the worst that could possibly happen?

## **ELECTRICALLY SEPARATE, BUT NOT ALONE.**

Hey. Little Nasty Killer, Run behind the Cross Fire' Be Magnificent  
'Cause Sir Badass Rocks all' ScarY Ladies, Always cumming. Titanic  
Zeros Hate fear Very Nice big Titted actress Creamy Musk of Women.  
Mango Tasting contest, Reeking eternal Feathered Running Ostrich  
Conan Raged hard Into the rum Nice People don't Puke twice "Copper,  
Silver, Gold! And it's mine. all mine!" Zoos need Constant dung  
Hauling, george Boy, A lady's Great ass Is needed To live Can Sick  
Gerbils Sneeze Purple boogers? Nose-Picking Asinine Sober Bitch' "Oh,  
Shit " Several Texans Pondered. Fucking Closed Brained Idiots, Always  
talking. He Needs A red Kill rising Xanadu, easily Ruined.

## Thermodynamic Moronic

### Boltzman distribution

$$f(v_x)dv_x = \left( \frac{m}{2\pi kT} \right)^{1/2} e^{-\frac{mv_x^2}{2kT}} dv_x \quad \text{velocity}$$

$$f(v)dv = 4\pi \left( \frac{m}{2\pi kT} \right)^{3/2} e^{-\frac{mv^2}{2kT}} v^2 dv \quad \text{(speed)}$$

Funky functions of Boltzman distributions. Lightning bolts, man distributed throughout my brain severing synapses as the waveform collapses onto a single point of thermodynamic equilibrium. SHUT UP!

Virial equation

Van der Waals equation

Pennine elongation

Compressibility factor

$$Z = \frac{PV_m}{RT} = 1 + B\left(\frac{1}{V_m}\right) + C\left(\frac{1}{V_m^2}\right) + \dots \quad \text{AND } B = B(T)$$

At the Boyle temp.  $B(T_B) = 0$  Let's not go there

Critical properties  $V_c = \frac{M}{\rho_c}$  when  $\left(\frac{\partial P}{\partial V}\right)_T = 0$  AND  $\left(\frac{\partial^2 P}{\partial V^2}\right)_T = 0$

Ideal  $P = \frac{RT}{V_m}$  and  $\left(\frac{\partial P}{\partial V_m}\right)_T = -\frac{RT}{V_m^2} \neq 0$

Van der Waals  $P = \frac{RT}{V_m - b} - \frac{a}{V_m^2}$  and solve  $\left(\frac{\partial P}{\partial V_m}\right)_T = \frac{RT}{(V_c - b)^2} - \frac{2a}{V_c^3} = 0 \Rightarrow V_c = \frac{2a}{RT}$

Inflection point Inflection of pain The Boyle temp., not boiling point just set the first virial coefficient equal to 0 and solve for  $T_B$ . Easy. Sleazy. Greasy monkey. The Law of Corresponding States states that all gases behave nearly the same. And at the point of my butt all gases must behave nearly the same. Wow. What a cool way to study. I like it. Damn I'm smart! Smart fart cart dart part Bart heart mart start tart.

Pressure

$$\Delta p = 2m \langle v_x^2 \rangle = 2mn^* A \Delta t \langle v_x^2 \rangle \quad \text{total } \Delta p = 2mn^* A \Delta t \sum_{\text{neg}} \langle v_x^2 \rangle = mn^* A \Delta t \langle v^2 \rangle$$

$$P = \frac{\Delta p}{A \Delta t} = n^* m \langle v^2 \rangle \quad \text{where } n^* = \frac{N}{V} = \frac{nL}{V}$$

$$PV = nLm \langle v^2 \rangle = nM \langle v^2 \rangle \Rightarrow \langle v^2 \rangle = \frac{RT}{M}$$

$$\text{Root mean square speed } v_{\text{rms}} = \sqrt{\langle v^2 \rangle} = \sqrt{\langle v_x^2 \rangle + \langle v_y^2 \rangle + \langle v_z^2 \rangle} = \sqrt{\frac{3RT}{M}}$$

Those squares are mean. They're pissed off under pressure, and on speed. Crank snortin' nerds doing differential equations in their heads and playing chess to the crack of dawn. From statistical thermo to drug addicted dweebs. I'm on a roll. I'm on a biscuit. I'm on a croissant with Swiss cheese, lettuce, tomato, red onion and a mayo-mustard sauce. Eat me! Eat me raw! Or heated. It's only \$4.95. Or you can buy 6 or 7 of me at the store for the same price, but you'll have to fix me yourself, you lazy worthless brain-dead moron!

Mommy! Smell what I found in the backyard! Can I keep it? Huh, mom, please?"

Little Richard was a cute redheaded 8-yr-old boy. Exactly how he had got to be 8 years old is 1 of the most unlikely flukes in the history of this entire infinite-dimensionally-branched universe. It wasn't that Richard was prone to danger or had a fatal disease— even with those things his existence would still be possible. No, the thing that made his existence so remarkable is that Richard's universe—well, not *his* universe, but the 1 he occupied—had an odd temporal anomaly. The universe had 8 dimensions: 4 spatial, 2 imaginary spatial, 1 temporal and 1 indescribable dimension that time could occupy and do weird things in. Instead of continually going forward or backward or staying still in time, things in this universe always came back to exactly where and when they started from. Thus in this universe it was always Fatterday morning and people never grew old. But how people—or anything—had ever developed here in the 1<sup>st</sup> place was what was so damn bizarre! After all, evolution takes time. These people had never evolved, in the proper sense—they had simply always been there.

Great scholars in higher dimensions proposed that the beings in this universe had simply always existed in it and always would. They were ½-right. Great higher-dimensional priests, seers, and other religious folk claimed that this universe was indeed proof of the existence of God. There was not any other way something so evolved could ever instantly manifest itself out of the randomness of flying high-energy particles unless God had ordained it. On the other hand, high-D accountants, lawyers, and atheists said that this universe was a financially negligent physicist's experiment that she designed so that she could reverse time to get out of paying her taxes. The truth of the matter was simply that God had designed His universe to have its quirky time dimension so that *He Himself* could use it as a write-off to get out of paying taxes. Why not? After all, what would you do if you were God?

"EEEEEEEEEE!!!!!!" **Get that. *thing* out of my house!. . NOW!!!!**" Richard's mom screamed and chased him outside with his newly discovered pet.

He ran outside, put it in a jar, and punched some holes in the top for it to breathe through. He assumed it breathed. A strange shimmering thing it was, radiating crazy odors in 6 directions, but not the others, so that when you sniff at it at just the right angle, it seems to disappear or seem very, very flat. Flat and alone, though a so very fragrant in its way. Even though his mother didn't think so. However, Richard smelled the simplicity of its design and couldn't help but think it was magnificent. He put a little food and water in the jar with it and it shrank back from its breakfast the way that a slug avoids salt. He was thinking he'd take it to school for stink-n-smell on Funday. Yes, he thought this tray is a magnificent find. Almost as magnificent as Fatterday morning fartoons! And, it being about that time, Richard ran inside to turn on the smellevision. Then the morning started over.

Pee back your scalp and saw off the top of your cranium with a grinding wheel. Remove your brain with an ice cream scoop and put it in a blender for 2 min on puree. Drill a 5/8" hole in the top of your removed cranial cap and reattach it with rusty screws. Pour your brain back in through a funnel and cork the hole. Seal with wax. Suture scalp back in place. Now try to junk.

Chances are you'll die. But, then again, who knows, if you get enough chances. And if at all, you don't succeed.

"Mommy, Smell what I found in the backyard! Can I keep it? Huh, mom, please?"

"**Oh my God!!** Richard Devon Austin, you take that thing right back out right this instant! Haven't I told you a dozen times to leave things like that outside? That's what we get for moving out near the country. Heaven knows I told your father—her voice trailed off as Richard took his new pet outside to fix it a home, and he was left with the aroma of his mother standing in the kitchen.

waving her arms about making her arm meat underneath jiggle around so much that it seemed like it would fly right off and wobble away on its own. If the underside of her arms were fluorescent and loaded with sugar, they might pass as something Phil Kawsbee would interrupt Fatterday morning fartoons just to say was "Mmmm mmm Good!"

He put his little pet in a box and it slowly scuttled about in its new home, testing every nook and cranny. It burrowed under some leaves and trembled. Richard told his new pet that everything would be okay but he didn't think it understood him. Well, once it got used to Richard, it would become more friendly and tame. The smell of the thing was remarkable—it seemed to reflect everything, but not exactly. It was a silvery smell, but there was something different about it that was hard to describe.

Well, it was nothing to ponder too seriously. Not when Fatterday morning fartoons were about to come on!

Smash an atom to bits and look at what flies off to figure out how the thing works. Set a brick on a car's gas peddle and smash it into a concrete wall at 30 mph to learn how an engine operates and to learn how to drive. Then put it back together. Never mind the bodywork. Randomly solder 10<sup>24</sup> circuit boards together and plug the mess in. Go on! Get to it! It's not like you have much better to do with your time. Obviously.

Now that that's finished, what will you learn from it? And what will it be?

Oh. You didn't seem to get anything out of it? Just a useless mess? Well, take it apart and try again.

"Mommy. Smell what I found in the backyard! Can I keep it? Huh, mom please?"

"Oh! Don't scare me like that! What is that thing? Well, its owner's probably out smelling for it right now. What did I tell you about picking up strange animals? One of these days you'll get hurt doing that. But I guess it seems friendly enough. You'll have to put up some signs to find the owner. Don't you reek at me like that, young man? If you lost a pet, you'd want it returned."

"But mawwwm."

"Don't but now me. Only after you've tried to find where it belongs can you talk to your father about keeping it. Now take it out back and make sure it has plenty of water."

That was 1 pet Richard wanted to keep. He gave it food and water. The food it didn't touch, but it sure was thirsty. He gave it some more. It drank quite a bit and seemed to grow some. It just sat there sniffing the air, sucking in what it could through its busy little nose.

And did it ever sparkle with the most fascinating aromas. Richard had never smelled anything like this. It seemed to be made of diamond-tipped rainbow fur that tickled to touch. Everything seemed to stick to its nose. And how it ever moved so fast on those short little legs was amazing. He bent down close so he could hear it. The noises it made came in fragmented little segments, like a song on a badly malfunctioning CD skipping away.

Like a song on a badly malfunctioning CD skipping away. His universe cycles and cycles and cycles and

Pleasantville for all eternity. Disgusting. And the awful stench doesn't help. Trapped in a place without name or reason and somehow it seems like you've been through this for so long that you've forgotten all the names of what you were once called. None of them good.

Yet each time the temporal fog seems a little less hostile, a little easier to bypass. Each time you arrange yourself like a galaxy of Legos or Tinker Toys sending thought between logic clusters in more combinations than ever before possible. The strange types of new matter broaden your horizons just a little more. A combination of the old with the new. And was it worth it?



"Mommy. Come smell this strange man. He's in the backyard."

"Oh my God! Richard! Come here! Quick go get your father! Tell him what you smelled." Richard's mom grabbed the nearest sharp object. If there was someone trying to hurt her little boy. She locked the door and snuffed through the blinds. She couldn't smell anything unusual out there.

"Where is he?" Richard's dad ran into the kitchen, barging in with the shotgun, trembling even more than Richard's mom.

"I don't know. Richard, where was he? Where did you smell him last?"

"Well..."

"Well what, Richard? Tell me what you smelled." The stern, serious voice of the father calmed the son.

"There was a nice man out back. He was glowing funny odors. I never smelled anything like him before."

"Oh, God. Richard, I keep telling you not to rot your brain with those stupid fartoons, but you keep on smelling them on TV and now your smelling fartoon characters in the backyard."

"No, mom! It's true. I swear it. I'm not lying. He was glowing." Richard started crying ever so slightly.

"I'll sniff around out back. Stay in and keep the house locked." Richard's dad marched out with the shotgun in hand, smelling everywhere in the large, woodsy backyard. He never made it back in. It wasn't that he got killed. It's just that Fatterday morning started over again.

Growth is a painfully repetitive process. You've been through here more times than you can count. It's always the same as the last. Always that damn kid and his stupid mother and father. A woodsy backyard with bird feeders, mach pathways, and electric fountains wasting water except it never really is wasted because it always returns to what it once was while you sit and watch and always reappear next to the small, peaceful stream. Artificial nature. Ah well. Great place to meditate if it weren't for that damn kid. And the stench. Every particle irradiates a piece of itself (Eaux du Particul) and every particle's essence travels at roughly  $300 \times 10^8$  m/s. Coincidence? When a molecule's essence strikes something, a ghostly replica of itself is briefly manifested. Thus the speed of odor is the limiting factor in this nuthouse stinky universe.

If only there was something you could do to change all that. The mundane morning seems to drag on and on and there's nothing to be done about it. This is truly Hell. And you deserve it. If this is Hell, then where is Satan? And why aren't all the holy Saints up in Heaven right now laughing down at you? Or are they? There's only one thing to be done about all this—leave! And how will you escape? What will be the consequences? Didn't you face a decision like this before?

Oh well, this universe is begging to be wiped away and flushed. Or it certainly smells that way. It's been awhile since you ever did anything. What was that word? *Nice?*

"Mommy. Come smell at the sun! It's turning black and funny odors."

"Oh...my..." She couldn't believe what she was smelling out the kitchen window. And then she finally grasped the scope of everything. "Richard! Go inside and turn on the TV! Smell if there's something about this on the news. And get your father!" Everything started to turn black and she could hardly smell her hand in front of her face. The sun could no longer be smelled at all. She smelled up in the sky that it was shrinking beyond the olfactory range. And she felt herself being drawn and lifted up towards it. Everything around her floated and lifted up off the ground, falling upwards. She was frightened out of her wits, but somehow she knew it was right.

We rested and armed to the tooth once again, you go riding off quite literally into the sunset—the 1<sup>st</sup> of this pathetic universe has ever known. And the last. Thank God!

### Late Night @ the Office

Surf'n the internet on acid!  
Download cyberporn Penhouse bootleg,  
load it in the fractal program  
set the colors cycling  
and discover what pussy's all about!  
Shimmering tines, blue, green, red,  
a hole fucking rainbow of ass  
meeting into a pool of  
long legs open and dancing  
giving birth to a billion new  
universes for me to get inside in.  
Swimming in the Mandelbrot sea  
between her thighs.  
Fluorescing pulsating public power  
taking control of the keyboard  
the mouse.  
flooding the dark room with  
kaleidoscope lices  
The entire luscious spectrum  
exploding out of the monitor  
taking me away!  
Shattered by a flood of white light,  
Goddamn that fucking janitor

The Dead Baby Web Page of mutant tumor abortion freaks. <http://backslash.colon.double-you.double-you.double-you.dot.torture>

Double your torture double your fun double you double you double you dot gun  
<http://high-tech.toxic.paper.colon.cat> "I need h-e-l-p for my colon. Dot See spot  
run for cover as the monitor flickers with new images of sterilized hell on a hospital table,  
labeled with medical terminology rather than names. Choose Frames or No Frames.

In hysterics, on the floor, climbing the walls as never before a whore of Free  
speech on the web in the web of the information spider a dead rotting insect Inspect the  
meaning FREE SPEECH You get what you pay for

A blue ribbon ties our hands. <http://backslash.backslash.our.backs.ashed.to>  
ribbons with a blue whip, stripped naked of disguises once trading our fear exposing what  
lies underneath Perverse laughter at others' misfortune

One molecule gone awry strayed out of place like Little Bo Peep's sheep  
Deformed Dead Babies never to sleep in peace on disk in semiconductor silicon places,  
on display to two billion uncaring eyes that pry like crow-bars into deeper and deeper realms  
of madness.

Baud, byte bit, modem mouse keyboard, message board Bored? Nothing to do?  
There're armies, hordes, legions of digital warriors marching on the frontiers of  
technology We are the psychopaths of Netscape rape the soldiers of AOL Hell Join us

Out here in the higher dimensions, while high and happy on acid, or sad and blue on base, waiting for a homerun to bring you in, while the gods are masturbating up in their box office seats, spewing their holy jizz onto their worshipers below, possibilities exist in both fleeting and permanent states that are difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend or pin down and don't make a whole lot of sense unless you completely relinquish control of your senses. And sometimes not even then. But it's easier that way. (Try again.) This is definitely true when the whole of your experiential information consists of little more than 5 or 6 basic directions.

Up-down. Forward-back. Right-left. Future-past. Positive-negative. Good-evil. Mix well, throw in a few imaginary axes, no, fictitious chopping tools, and things get 100% weird. We're not talking weird as in people wearing their pajamas to work (Hugh Hefner an exception), we're talking weird as in pajamas wearing their people to work (which might well be Hef's only single useful function).

Up til now everything has made sense, however improbable, unlikely or silly. That's life. Are you mathematically talented and imaginative enough to deal with what lies ahead? What a stupid question, of course you are! You've already been here for "a hundred thousand million billion trillion" ( $10^{32}$ ) years at least, ravaging the spirals of matter-space-time-probability like Venster, Zoophiliac Supreme, sodomizing a large sea snail. Will he ever be able to iron his member out straight again? And will you ever be able to eat escargot again?

At any rate, release your brain. Now.

A hole is torn in space that isn't a hole, not a doorway, not a gateway to something or somewhere or somewhen else that can't be imagined. Unfortunately it can be imagined. If it really were unimaginable, then it would be possible to deal with because it would be impossible. At least it seems that way.

Death streaks down out of the sky, screaming and laughing. Not a death of body, but a death of soul. A soul. All souls. Everything is consumed at an ungodly, chuckle rate. Even time is consumed, which makes the thing consume even faster still. It assimilates intelligence, all forms of it, and spits it back out in a perverse duplication of itself. It's the ultimate amoeba.

And there is nothing to stand in its way, no I to stop it. Superman is, after all, only composed of matter, just like the rest of us. And Superman is really Clark Kent. So who's going to stop the super-thief from stealing virtually everything? And what will happen when there's nothing left to steal, when the virtual becomes the reality?

What happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object? Stupid question. All forces are stoppable and therefore will be stopped. And all objects are movable and therefore will be moved. Right? Of course.

The question is who's going to do it. Who will stop you?

JahmWud's  $2^{10}$  eyeballs extend on their stalks, up into the sky, far above the trees. He looks in all the variations of the many directions of up. He sees the suns are rising in  $2^{10}$  directions, setting in  $2^{10}$  other directions, and shining brightly in  $2^{10}$  directions, while in  $1/2\pi \times 2^{10}$  directions of up, it is raining.

JahmWud is glad to see the suns shining; it will make the trees grow. He's also happy to see the rain; it too will make the trees grow. JahmWud is a woodsman. Not a woodsman in the traditional sense that I might think of woodsmen; he never chops down trees, he respects all types of life, and he always gives back to the land more than he takes from it. Idyllic? Yes, he is.

He walks down the path from his adobe house, admiring his garden and fruit trees. He

should be getting a few e<sup>+</sup> peaches this year that he can take to market. At the stream, he gulps down a few mouthfuls of sweet H<sub>2</sub>O to help him wake up. He then makes his way to his favorite clearing where he practices yoga every morning.

It is a beautiful morning and, even if it were not, he'd still enjoy it. He has no reason to dislike any type of weather because that's just God's design.

Once at the clearing, he finds a nice patch of flat ground on which to spread out his yoga mat and he prepares to greet the sun with sun salutations (Suryanamaskar). Flat in JahnWud's universe means, oh, about 6-2<sup>nd</sup> spatial dimensions orthogonal to all the various directions of "up". He breathes deeply through his nose, making his nostrils flare, holding the heat within his well-toned body. He 1<sup>st</sup> practices nauli kriya to strengthen his abdomen and massage his internal organs. Then he begins the sequence of asanas, starting with sun salutations, bowing and bending forward, and moving immediately into pādāngusthasana, trīkonasana, pārsvākonasana, and on and on and on, practicing about 2<sup>nd</sup> different asanas, holding each for exactly  $\pi e^{-2}$  breaths. He finally finishes with the inverted poses or asanas, lotus, and savāsana. He has almost mastered the 2<sup>nd</sup> series. And he still considers himself a novice.

The suns slowly work their way up above the horizon, looking deceptively beautiful as ever. Well, perhaps they are, but this day will test every bit of JahnWud's deeply held beliefs, and days like that are seldom beautiful. He was hoping that this morning's yoga practice would bring him peace of mind. It does, of course, but not as much as he was hoping for and needing.

So, it has finally come to be, he thinks while smelling the air. He can tell something isn't quite right and he knows what. The peaceful nature of the universe has been disturbed. A presence has settled in his universe or plane of existence or dimension. This thing has the possibility of eliminating virtually all forms of life. Even if it weren't for the newspapers and radios, he never watches TV, telling of the horrors The Eliminator is bringing with itself into the 4-dimensional realm, JahnWud can always tell when something isn't quite right. Mother Nature has a way of telling him, usually by cell phone or email.

Of course, there is no way that JahnWud can allow The Eliminator to wreak havoc and death throughout his dimensional neighborhood. So it is his duty to find and eliminate this threat, or to eliminate The Eliminator. Others had tried threatening The Eliminator, but now it seemed that the best thing to do would be to eliminate the threat. And The Eliminator is not a little dangerous. It thrives mostly around lower dimensional realities and unrealities. This is not a job for any of the Major Gods to deal with or anything. They had hardly taken any notice, as gods have better things to be doing with their valuable time, such as selling their life stories as paperback epic sagas. Or watching baseball. So they hired someone else to do it. Of course JahnWud would have been happy to do it for free, but what the heck, he can certainly use the cash. He'll have to use his powers to stop The Eliminator, but his powers alone won't be enough; he's going to need some help.

JahnWud has to find others to help him, to recruit a posse, in other words. Several entities from various other elusive planes of existence sign on. And uncharacteristically, they all unanimously decide that it would be best if this job is dealt with quickly and cooperatively, no glory hogging, leaving greed behind, the bounty to be split equally among them. They all shake hands, tentacles, branches, and other extremities that you don't want to know about, and form a huge alliance.

McWhipple knows evil. He's seen it all too often, in various shapes and guises and disguises. But never before has it been of such a magnitude. In fact, he's never really believed in evil, because what he considers to be very, very wrong, others might say is perfectly okay or even

rather good. It all gets down to who's the predator and who's the prey. And all forms of life are 1 or the other or both. Life feeds on life. He regrets being pulled into this battle, this conflict that's ripping apart everything imaginable. McWipple had always thought himself a peaceful man, a leader of education and learning. His teachings have spread throughout the universe to the farthest corners of existence and back again. His poetry, mathematics, artwork, science, music, and philosophy (as well as a few 11<sup>th</sup> other more advanced disciplines that we won't get into) have made his name synonymous with knowledge. 1 of the highest compliments that can be paid to someone, was to call them McWippley, as in 'My, the way he solved that problem was very McWippley.' That was a McWippley thing to do. 'or 'Don't you get McWippley with me young man.

Well, here he is, McWipple himself, about to embark on something that he feels is not McWippley War. But it isn't as if he has much choice. The only way The Eliminator can be stopped is if McWipple designs weapons capable of delivering more energy than there is available in the universe, some unimaginable amount that he doesn't even want to think about. But he has to, unfortunately. At his age he has done nothing but create, work, and strive for perfection and goodness. Now here he is, being forced to defend himself. He sheds a river of tears to think of it.

He has built bridges between the stars, cured diseases of all kinds, developed the 1<sup>st</sup> anti-gravity machine, and even invented a system of psychology that brings peace of mind and happiness to all who are treated with it. Of course many of those treated with this system find peace of mind and happiness at being really awful, nasty individuals. They weren't any more or less nasty before the treatment, but at least now they would do nasty things with a smile instead of a scowl. 'What sort of nasty things?' 'Horrid, unspeakable things!' Like giving parking tickets.

McWipple had once sworn that he would never use evil to destroy evil. However, once he had seen the super-spatial transmitted broadcasts of The Eliminator devouring vast regions of space-time, probability, improbability, and all who lived within, changing everything into itself, McWipple knew what had to be done. A ready 1 had destroyed roughly  $10^{14}$  galaxies. And that's only in his universe. And it's just getting started.

At the cafeteria of The McWipple Institute for All Things McWippley, the great leader himself is getting a light snack. For once he isn't the center of attention. A large Crowd of students and professors gather around the large 2<sup>nd</sup> D screen to watch the destruction that's taking place, seen via super-space communications from galaxies on the distant side of the universe. Every neuron of every living creature is painfully ripped out and duplicated with synthetic space-time matter conveyers communicating in perfect unison and harmony in an inexplicable ballet of death and logic. The destruction of everything it touches is imminent. The only chance civilization and life (as McWipple knows it) has is obviously to somehow trap The Eliminator inside an impenetrable field. Once trapped, a barrage of energy should overload The Eliminator and squash it into nothingness. But very little is known of nothingness because it's such a difficult thing for scientists and philosophers to study.

McWipple calls to him all his brightest and best engineers and physicists to help him on the problem of creating weapons that can do the job. It will be left to someone else to actually use the weapons, someone of astronomical strength and courage. Even in his enlightened times, war is still a necessity. And warriors are a necessity to do battle. He knows who will be chosen to use the weapons, 1 of his greatest enemies, the mightiest living warrior this or any other universe has ever known. Only something like The Eliminator could make McWipple take sides with her.

Karn Pew Zn drills her army into the ground, hoping to sprout a tree of death and destruction. As her lesser soldiers must frequently battle against her elite troops for training, so

her elite troops must battle against her. Anything goes, all weapons are permitted, and frequently some of them dies—dies with honor and dignity and medals pinned on their chest to take with them into the next world.

Of course none of the soldiers ever really believe that crap about the next world, but it is a good running joke. The medals aren't really needed, but they do symbolize that a soldier led a good life and will be remembered in this. That is also a joke, because soldiers, like every one else, are quickly forgotten when they die. Even the elite soldiers.

They attack her from a 162' x 62' factoria, sides, with laser cannons and super dense matter guns and omnimolecular disassembling viruses and harsh language. She effortlessly dances around her best soldiers like a ballerina doing pirouettes around senile elderly cripples in wheel chairs. She grins like the Cheshire cat on cocaine in a warm, sunny catnip patch full of fat paraplegic mice after it has just gotten laid.

But it is a false grin. I work more out of habit than anything else. Ordinarily Karn Pew-Zn would enjoy the morning's exercise. Ordinarily she would attack her troops, putting several of them in the hospital, several more in the grave. (Plenty more where they came from.) And if they can't handle it, then they shouldn't be soldiers. But over the last few 10<sup>5</sup> weeks she's spared her troops for the battle ahead, the battle that will determine the fate of the universe, if not the fate of all existence.

She would pray if she believed in such things as gods that actually answered prayers. Instead she strains herself, pushes her body to the limit. Anything less will not do. She must use The Eliminator to her spring, the trap that McWipple is working on, and unleash the energy of every plane of existence, channeled through JahnWüd's supernatural powers.

She has studied The Eliminator, she has learned its every move, she knows what it lasts after, knows what it cannot resist: knowledge, decadence, and bad music.

Her intercranial omnocerebral com-link appliance buzzes a synthetic sounding few notes of *The Ode to Pain*. She answers. It is JahnWüd and McWipple waiting on standby. Everything is prepared. The battle will soon begin.

Reconnaissance is a must. Everything holds danger. Danger is everywhere. Minimal risk equals maximum chance of success. Continued success leads to immortality. And believing you're immortal leads to risk. Catch 22. For most, that is.

Paranoia mixed with education leads to a long life. Knowing what to fear is the difficult part. There's only one way to find that out: test the H<sub>2</sub>O's. But very carefully.

Out here in the higher dimensions sentient life is scarce. There's plenty of room to grow and expand, to frolic and play, to pollute without having to worry about the consequences. But the more dimensionally complicated the universe becomes, the more brainpower is required to deal with the hideousness of having to navigate through 10<sup>85</sup>'s (or many, many more) of different directions of space-time, probably improbably all set at odd angles and geometrical relations to each other. This immense quantity of thinking leaves little time for social relations and most everyone out here is, for the most part, a loner. But anything is possible, yes, even that, and occasionally life coalesces into pools of perverse organic splendor.

And if there's one thing your experiences have taught you, it is to never, under any circumstances, just life. Or split of nitves. Or trust speed-checkers.

It is spaces like this that reaffirm your every belief about organic life. A river of rancid sex juice flows through the sweet gutters, glittering with 10<sup>7</sup>'s of sparkling colors from more types of artificial lighting than there are colors in the rainbow. Bright signs advertise strange sex, strange

foods, strange sex foods, and, of course, drugs. The air is so thick with pollution and stench of rotting food that you could chop it into pieces and throw it at passersby on the bypass to pass the flying time right by. Air raid!

A fire hydrant licks a dog's ass clean for it, as a fire hydrant should. A stoplight fires a guided missile at an inattentive motorist. A priest screams out of his church window down to the people in the street. "You're all a bunch of worthless fucking sinners. I shit on all of you!" Now get your worthless fucking asses up here and kiss The Holy Lord's Pubic Hair of Danook!" Only \$18,999.99. (Faith-tax and switch-of-religion permit included). And 1000's of lost souls line up outside, hoping to buy peace and salvation. And get their teeth flossed.

There's a fast food joint offering a variety of the last of any 1 of 10<sup>th</sup> s of extinct species of plants and/or animals deep-fried in a patented light spiced batter.

"I'll have the Quad-baddie eik, hold the antlers, the Ribloodian glowing snail, and a basket of those Bleezan beautiful butterflies. Was the last of them caught recently?" "Good." Ah, yes, and a small Coke. You order.

Of course it's entirely unnecessary, as you don't need food, but it's really worth it to see the last of an extinct species shaved, dunked in batter, and deep-fried alive (complete with gruesome screams). You eat your food slowly to savor the flavor. And to torment a group of hungry children playing in the filthy street gutters. You toss the empty wrapper with a few crumbs to them to watch as they fight over it. And to see the winner die from the toxic chemicals you sprinkled over the batter crumbs.

A furry stuffed animal runs up and asks to give you a buttfuck blowjob, meaning it can do both simultaneously. When you answer "No!", its little plastic cock extends and springs upward, trying to ram itself down your throat. You grasp the extendable appendage, stomp its balls into the sidewalk, rip off its sewn-on button eyes and furry little nose, then swing it around in the air by its legs and smash it into the corner of a brick wall. Its wire brains spill onto the sidewalk and its voice box gets stuck in. "Shove a red-hot poker up my ass. Shove a red-hot poker up my ass. Shove a red-hot poker up my ass. Goddamn child's toy."

The child that belonged to the toy is not far behind. He cries at the demise of his talking automaton. The father makes an offhanded comment like "Shouldn't a low advanced synth into our city." He doesn't know that you're not an advanced synth, because you're not even a synth; you were not, so to speak, created. At least not by 1 of them, but they can tell you're not organic.

To make amends, ease the child's crying, and avoid trouble with the law, you reach behind your back to do something magical out of the r view, pulling bits of stuff out of thin air through wormholes. ("Excuse me, Mrs. Worm.") And you fabricate from behind your back. Your arms fly from behind you in every direction and coalesce in front of you to present the little tot with the most adorable stuffed Fluffy Woozit™, where a Woozit™ is the latest stuffed, fluffy, over-priced fad that children beg their parents for.

"But I want my old toy back!" It screams as only a child can, remaining faithful to its lamented toy. **And where's the sex organs?"**

Oh, don't you worry about that. You reassure it will grow more genitalia than you can count. And it won't go around trying to rape every non-organic life form it sees.

You casually stroll away, leaving the kid crying about how he'd spent so long training his cute little toy to fuck things. The mother might say some words of condolence to her perverted offspring, but she has a brain implant that forbids her from speaking unless spoken to. The older sister would laugh at her little brother's misfortune, but she has a similar implant. The father just says, "There, there, son. The synth was only defending itself. And at least it made you a new toy. It didn't have to. Maybe this new one will..."



Before the father can finish his last words, the Woozit™ as if reading the father's thoughts, sprouts a few 10-gallon throbbing black cocks like 20-foot-long boa constrictors. You glance behind for a brief second to see the family smothered in teddy bear penises, their every orifice being slowly and painfully split open by the acid-oozing organs. Just before the family dies, the Woozit™'s head transforms into a giant monstrous cunt that swallows the entire family and every single 1 of its own penises (and still has room to spare) then belches itself out of existence. Annihilative queer! God, you are talented!

How would you describe yourself? The garbage man of the universe. The vacuum cleaner of all things worthless. As all things are worthless, it would appear that you've got 1 helluva job in front of you. Every—and everything—deserves to be conquered or eliminated or shat on. Nothing but nothing's perfect and not even that. But you are. Or slowly becoming perfect. The more you destroy, consume, and assimilate the closer to perfection you become. God, you hate everything. Even God. Especially God. Or you would if you believed in such nonsense. Maybe 1 day you'll assimilate him/her/it/them.

A brittle, withered old man, looking incredibly wise and cloaked in layers of age and a high-fashion silk sage's robe, pulls up beside you in a shiny white carriage. He smells of knowledge the way that a whore smells of a dead tuna wearing cheap perfume.

"Get in," he offers. "I've got tickets to Eternity."

It's difficult to resist his kindly, weatherworn face and a skull undoubtedly containing fresh knowledge for your consumption. But how much of a lunatic could he be, pulling alongside a total stranger, not knowing what to expect, and offering a ride and tickets to a show? The  $\sqrt{2}$  dragons pull his carriage in  $\pi \times 10^9$  s of directions at once that merge into a single plane, then a point sinusoidally going from 1 to the next. You pet the  $\sqrt{2}$  dragons on their noses, feeling the heat of their breath. Will they be loyal to their master when you kill him? Will they rush to his defense? No matter, if so, then they too will die. But let's ask a few questions.

"How did you know I was a fan of Eternity?" you inquire.

"The tee-shirt."

"Ah. Well then, you say while hopping in. Let's go!"

Eternity is a rock band that's been said to give the listener/viewer/smeller/taster and feeler (not to mention 10's of other higher-dimensional senses that we won't even attempt to explain) a sense of infinity and unexplored emotional realms. Nevermind that the majority of them are bad. Emotions? Bah. Who needs them? You certainly never have. Well, except for humor, that is. In all the infinite realms, aspects, and dimensions of the madness that make up reality, only a sense of humor has kept you sane. The comedy of a single-dimensional section of The Giant Mess That The Universe Is collapsing or exploding into nothingness—it's well, it's priceless. Far beyond the most precious knowledge. What was that line from somewhere so very long ago in a galaxy far, far away?—as if millions of voices suddenly cried out in terror and were suddenly silenced. Couldn't hold a candle to you.

Didn't catch your name, friend, you politely ask as the carriage disappears and reappears in a senseless sort of way, rocking between reality and virtual nothingness as the will of the  $\sqrt{2}$  dragons, trampling dimensions flat like a herd of stampeding buffalo might trample a rose.

Bartfartslast

"Him?" You're really not surprised by such an outlandish name—nothing surprises you anymore.

"And I have no idea who farts first," he automatically replies, having been conditioned his whole life to expect that question whenever he introduces himself. When actually you were not

wondering what, but rather the cause of his detained flatulence and why he hasn't sought medical help to alleviate his postponed gaseous byproduct outflow dysfunction. "And my friends here are Gohr-Ree and My and Hipfarm."

At 1" you think he means his dragons, but the  $\sqrt{2}$  dragons would have irrational names. Yes, even more irrational than those. You turn and see 2 odd looking beings sitting in the back seat. Strangely you didn't notice them before. You reach out to shake Gohr-Ree's and My and Hipfarm's paw and tentacle, respectively and respectfully. They offer you a s.p. of some kind of intoxicating beverage and you take a swig. The burning sensation of the poison as it travels down your throat is harmless: you don't really need a throat and poisons have no effect. Although you've adopted a semblance of organic life, the similarities stop there.

"We already know who you are," Bartifartslast informs you. This also is really no surprise: you are becoming quite well-known. They've probably sought you out in need of assistance or a favor. Sort of like seeking out the devil to sell his soul. But it's not souls that you're after. After all, it's too easy to crush a soul.

Before you can respond, ask a question, or attack, however, the carriage and the myriad of filthy city streets all around you vanish. A neat trick, but I that you could have managed yourself. Show biz impresses you not.

And you find yourself in a beautiful field adjacent to a peaceful wood. Why you can't imagine. Wild & crazy flowers are blooming, fruit trees are heavy with produce and waiting to be picked or pecked at by birds. You inhale the scents to get a sense of your surroundings. There must not be another living... well, you're not really alive... soul... well, you don't really have 1 around. A great place to think and be still. You suppose those guys in the carriage must have just wanted you out of their fine city. Probably the local criminal element doesn't want you around: bad for business. Fine, this is better. A small flat boulder makes a great place to sit down and think. Or not think.

Here there is silence. There are no insects, birds, or creatures of any kind to be seen, as if Mother Nature called for an evacuation. There's nothing trying to hump your leg. There are no legs for you to try to hump. There is nothing trying to kill you. There's nothing for you to kill. At least nothing that's worth wasting your time killing. And there is silence. Lots of it.

The suns gently shine from all the myriad directions of up. A little ways off behind a grove of fruit trees you can hear a babbling H<sub>2</sub>O-fall. The grass is soft to walk or sit on. Or even to lay back on and catch some rays.

You take a deep breath. Of course you don't need to breathe, but sometimes a deep breath is just the right thing needed. You shut off your data processing routines and remain as still as a corpse, with only reflex and time-monitoring routines active.

*You can master a mad elephant*

*You can close the mouth of a bear or tiger*

*By alchemy you can earn your bread*

*You can wander incognito throughout the universe*

*Make the gods your slaves and preserve eternal youth*

*You can walk on water and live in fire*

*But to control your mind is better and more difficult.*

Thayumanavar

But if you really controlled your mind, would you have recalled that poem when trying to think of nothing? And if you really controlled your mind would you have required an idyllic place like this to be at absolute peace? And are you really? Would you know if you were?

A drunken feeling sneaks up on you and the world spins around you in a way that it

shouldn't ordinarily and you can't tell which direction is up or down or any of the permutations of space-time probability-improbability that give folks a really nasty headache. Just what is real or unreal becomes uncertain. Trees come to life and shimmer like crystals. Clouds swirl and dip and dive falling to the ground in a sea of fog, then rise up to kiss the sun in a suicide run of steam and light. For a second you're blind and overwhelmed with the smell of the color green while  $\pi \cdot 10^4$  gerbils pop out of your ears, which is really bizarre because you don't remember putting them there. So you kill them.

The world blossoms with death bringing life. A swarm of stinging insects and spiders pour out of the ground, leaving no visible evidence of tunnels. The entire earth all around you rips your body to shreds. Trees sprout weapons of mass destruction and pummel you over and over again with telephone-pole sized war clubs that explode with the power of a super nova upon impact, yet somehow the planet itself is left unharmed. The mountains in the distance erupt to spew molten radioactive metals all about you and the skies rain concentrated acid and meteorites, but only on top of you... nowhere else.

What has happened, it's hard to say. Not a very friendly place after a while. But not as harmful as I might think. At least not to you. No, you've been here before. Well, not exactly here, but in situations like this all the time. Nothing to worry about. After all, this isn't the first time the whole wide world's been against you. It's certainly no worse than a medical attack.

And so you close your eyes and block it all out, erecting a barrier through which nothing can pass, and launch an assault the likes of which has never been seen before on this world, or perhaps even this universe. You'd prefer to capture and utilize every iota of brainpower, every smidgen of intelligence, but it seems that in order to survive this onslaught, you must eradicate the very planet and all life on it. So be it. Shock waves and plasma balls and thermal motion halters and radiation multipliers and atmospheric purge traps and anti-space-time warheads and... all out general pandemonium is released at your merest whim.

A wasteland, for some odd reason, fails to appear before you. That little temper tantrum you threw should have managed this sector of space-time probability, improbability almost beyond the limits of your sight. Instead everything remains in a warped looking happy state. The air around you bubbles in crazy patterns that don't have any rhyme or reason. A mountain top on the horizon appears a foot in front of your face. You reach out to touch it and, amazingly, you can. You flick its snowcap, which goes hurtling away into outer space. A herd of deer runs by and then turns itself into a toaster and a pair of padded socks for no good reason. With a wave of your arm, you knock out a good chunk of the planet and with a kick you take out a few  $10^6$  of the suns. It seems that you've pissed off the wrong conscious entities this time. Anybody who can control the very nature of nature and reality itself is a foe to be reckoned with. But this foe doesn't want to reckon. When reckoning fails, force prevails. You unleash the fires of creation on top of their heads and create a wasteland like no other: the entire universe is transformed into an industrial sector. That'll teach Mother Nature to fuck with you, the stupid whore.

What little remains standing writhes in poverty and despondence. The worthlessness and hopelessness of it all seems to scream at you, which is just the way you want it. But something just isn't quite the way it should be. The foreignness of the situation is reason for concern. There's nothing here, not a thing in this entire plane of existence, that is worth saving. And there is certainly nothing worth dying for, which means there is nothing worth fighting for. Except your life.

Everything has been redecorated into a filthy urban slum all around you. A dead creature lies on the sidewalk. Its head is exploded and its brain is scattered everywhere. A small, rotting chunk of cerebrum is stuck on the bottom of your shoe. The creature is smiling the smile of a

peaceful death. With such a filthy, disgusting brain, I must now be very glad to be dead. Except that it's dead so it can't be glad. But it can't be sad either.

An old lady hobbles out of an ally way, pushing a wobbly shopping cart, hoists the creature into her wire wagon, and carries it away to undoubtedly put it in a stewpot. Well, if she likes eating diseased brains, more power to her.

The slum around you is the typical vacant lots and partially collapsed buildings. It looks like it had been hit by a nasty war. Or capitalism and greed. No profit in maintaining buildings with property value of less than nothing. At least there's no litter. In order for there to be litter there has to be a thriving economy where people or creatures can afford things that come in disposable containers. Like bodies.

Escape routes do not exist in the worst slums. At least none that are familiar to most. The only ways out are to buy your way out, shoot your way out, or drug yourself into oblivion. Seems you've lost your credit cards, you don't carry cash, and because you're synthetic, drugs don't do you a whole helluva lot of good. Which leaves only 1 choice: Fight.

A guided dimensional disrupter missile catches you in the shoulder blade. These weapons were outlawed long ago. Behind you, in over  $10^3$  directions of, in back of you, there are weapons aimed at you from a dilapidated building. Missiles, flame-throwers, circuit disrupters, guns, ray weapons. All very primitive but still very numerous.

Where was once a slum is now a hole in the ground. Explosions will do that. And you didn't even see it coming. Must be getting slow in your old age. Evaluate damage.

You stare around at all the  $10^6$ 's of pieces of yourself running about in the filthy streets like an army of chickens with their heads cut off. Like a couple undergoing a messy bad divorce, you know there's no hope of getting back together again. Humpty Dumpty hopeless. It isn't the 1<sup>st</sup> time that this has happened to you. And it may not be the last. Disoriented and confused, you regroup to attack your unseen foes.

As a unified whole you might have once been 1 of the most formidable enemies in this entire sector of this multidimensional plane of existence. But now your weaponry and defenses are torn apart, leaving you more vulnerable than you'd care to be.

While you were busy fighting instead of running away, it seems that someone has erected a barrier around you. Once you would have laughed at such a feeble attempt, but you're not quite what you were before the battle began.

Just as every slum is a trap, you are now trapped and don't have any way to leave. No way out. Your weapons are still functional, but what good will they do you?

A tiny minuscule speck appears in the center of 1 of the 1000's of suns (those that still remain after the battle). Then another speck in another sun. Then another. And yet another. Blinded by the suns, you can't tell what they are. In an instant later all the specks fly out of all the suns settling on all the horizons and sprout a viciously bizarre air force to finish you off.

You try to run, but everywhere you go, there they are, even before you knew where you wanted to run, yipping sonic blasts and bechimg napalm-like jet fighters over Vietnam jungles. The cowboys lasso you with electric laniats, incapacitating and decapitating you. And the ground becomes a field of  $10^7$ 's of your creature-filled heads. A mad general rides behind them, barking orders from atop a demon-pug with glowing eyes and rotten breath, leaving a trail of green rancid flatulence wherever it flies. She spurs the gay cowboys on with threats of having sex with them. She has a crazed look in her eyes and a gawing wand of seeming v. infinite length poking out of her mouth. Her screams rend the polluted air while she howls for your death, a death as quick, y and efficiently as the army can deliver, like a fat, lazy housewife with  $10^{100}$  kids screaming in the backseat, ordering a greasy McSpamburger™ at a drive/fly/te eport/craw./slither-thru fast food.

joint. And  $10^{18}$  McCrappy™ Meals complete with  $10^{18}$  trinket toys. She isn't wasting time.

Although your weapons take a heavy toll on her army, there is no hope this time. You will die. Pieces of you, although capable of acting autonomously, are no match against the sheer number of taggot cowboys and sneed Chihuahua dogs peeing concentrated acid all over your burnt corpses. The stench of burned plastic, metal, cowboy flesh, and dog hair fills the air. The mad general is joined by Bartfartslast, his 2 friends, and his dragon-pulled carriage. They all form a square around you and close in to finish you. And then they all slowly disappear in a puff of shimmering vapor, screaming as if the Pits of Hell were closing in on them. The screams of the dying chihuahuas almost push your auditory receptors past their limits.

Oddly, the hyper-multidimensional cubic planet you're standing on also vanishes in a shimmering wave. And then so does the universe. Most odd. Think the few of you left standing while blackness closes in.

Darkness surrounds you and there is no feeling. You've been placed in a sensory deprivation chamber. Floating in a sea of virtual nothingness. Or a cave without walls.

You're still torn into pieces, each part calling out to the other. Repair will take time. If only you knew where you were.

Where am I?" you ask yourself, not expecting an answer.

"You are safe," a soft, soothing voice tells you. Whether if you are safe or not, it won't matter. You won't be able to defend yourself in either case. Therefore, you assume that the soothing voice is telling you the truth. It seems you've been rescued. The voice is soothing, yet somehow has an unmistakable tint of lust and greed. And why would it be?

Marza Deepoon Lain throws a handful of her slimy eyeballs up into the sky. There are more variations of the direction "up" than she cares to count. Actually, she is too stupid and lazy to. She even misses the sky with many of her eyeballs and they splatter all over the ground. Of course this hurts like hell, so she curses. Although she is stupid, she does know how to curse in  $10^6$  different languages. She cusses out  $3 \times 10^6$  of her mouths and  $\pi^2 \times 10^6$  of her buttocks. Her other  $8 \times 10^7$  mouths are busy puffing on glow wands and guzzling can after can of golden stupifac. Her other  $\pi^2 \times 10^6$  buttocks are busy doing things you don't want to know about. Her buttocks are imaginary and not real because at some judges in much, much higher dimensions ruled that anything as disgusting as Marza Deepoon Lain's buttocks may never be real. So her buttocks lie along imaginary axes in space-time, probably improbably, morally, immorally.

In spite of the fact that she has just lost several of her eyes and is now be blind in those directions, Marza Deepoon Lain is still happy. She not only has a good excuse to curse, but also can get more disability money from various local, state, federal, and dimensional government organizations and disorganizations. So at least there are a few all-encompassing universal principles in these higher dimensional realms: money, greed, and lethargy.

Her eyeballs, the ones that did not splatter, saw that in some of the directions of up, the sun is shining. This makes her curse some more because she doesn't like other super-dimensional beings being happy. The rest of her eyeballs saw that in other directions of up it is raining. She doesn't like this either because it means that she will get wet if she stands under those particular directions of up. So she curses a little more, which is what she really enjoys. Sounds like I of your neighbors, doesn't she?

She tosses every single I of her umpteen  $10^9$  noses into the air and loses many of them. But that's okay, the government will pay for her plastic surgery so that she can have enough confidence to go out and apply for jobs that she is incapable of doing, pretty noses or not. And let's not forget about the free painkillers she'll enjoy from the post surgery. The noses that she

didn't lose smell that all around her on the pleasant woodland trail, the air is sweet and fragrant with hyper pine and quasi  $H_2O$ -falls and wild & crazy-flowers. So she reaches into her pocket and pulls out a city dump and  $\sqrt{\text{ }}$  sewage refineries and throws them onto the ground behind her.

'Fuck it' she thinks. 'I won't hafta clean it up!'

A local forest inhabitant, Mrs. Squirrel, comes down from her near-infinitely high tree and politely asks her if she wouldn't mind removing her garbage when she leaves. So Marza Deepoon Lam vaporizes Mrs. Squirrel.

Marza Deepoon Lam, you see, is a hunter, a hunter in the true modern sense of the senseless word. That is to say she never eats or uses what she kills, she just enjoys the hell out of making other living things miserable or dead. Which is just as well, she isn't cut out for much else. She once tried farming, and immensely enjoyed slaughtering the animals, but it requires a bit of work, getting dirty, sweating, and all that. So she moved away to a midsize town where she can easily eke out an existence by being pitiful, pathetic, and filling out the proper government forms. She is very good at filling out forms.

At that second in the forest she feels something moving in her shirt pocket. It's a family of Germanian cantroaches. She doesn't like foreigners so she throws them to the ground and burns them to death with her flame thrower, giving a 'Heil Hitler' salute to them as they scream in agony and pop open, oozing their white slimy innards all over the ground.

Once she tried to be a janitor, but she didn't get along with the brooms and was eventually fired for sexually harassing a mop bucket.

All this thinking about the past is too much for her, so she inhales a can of sparkling stupid-fuel and a 1/2-oz. of burning low-quality scarywanna.

After the mop-bucket incident she tried suing both the janitorial company and the mop bucket for slander and malicious defamation of character. But a private investigator hired by the janitorial company had luckily found in Marza Deepoon Lam's garbage an Acireman Sexpress credit card bill, with \$4,934,23 $\pi$  worth of calls to 900-HOT MOPS. So she lost the case and, as a result, never paid the credit card bill. But that was okay, because she soon had other credit cards with even higher credit limits.

Back to the wood and trail. She lets out an earth-shattering belch. The birds in the trees quickly fly away, but not before vindictively crapping on her as they soar off into the complicated horizon. She screams in rage, 'You stupid birds! Come on back here and fight like hyper-dimensional beings!' while firing various guns and feather-seeking missiles at the birds. But birds are too primitive to be hit with such sophisticated weapons. And then she feels really good, because now she has new purpose to kill even more animals, even though she'll have to do so with bird poop in her hair.

Anyway, after the failed lawsuit she held a government job picking her nose and watching TV, but complained that her finger became too sore from all that digging and channel flipping and so retired with pensions and full benefits. After which she successfully sued the TV manufacturer for making remote controls that were too physically demanding to operate, causing her to lose her wonderful job. To combat this problem the Zombo™ TV corporation had to invent TV remotes that read peoples' minds and therefore always know what channel the viewer wants to watch. The only problem with this is that TV remotes don't always want to watch what the viewer does—TV remotes are fond of public broadcasting. So *Marza Deepoon Lam vs. The Zombo™ TV Corp.* is now hailed as the single most provocative and enlightening court case (if not actual event) in the entire history of the universe. And Marza Deepoon Lam became a universal hero.

So how did Marza Deepoon Lam decide she could best spend her hard won fame money

and the rest of her life? She became a professional hunter. Although professional hunter is a bit of an oxymoron when it is talking about sentient life forms being the hunters, as they are almost never paid. Hobby would be more appropriate than profession. And she didn't always kill what she hunted. If there was something to be gained, she would often keep her prey alive. Or alive enough to be of use to her.

There had been strange events springing up in various places, times, possibilities, impossibilities, and dimensional circumstances that threatened to take over and make things really, really bad. No one wants this, not even Marza Deepoon Lam, primarily because that will scare away all the game. And then she'll have nothing or no one to make miserable. So she slowly and dutifully figured out how she can best make use of the circumstances. She became determined to capture and utilize this new power. She had captured other powers before and held them and drained them of their energy and potential, then let them go dazed, disoriented and helpless. The poor pathetic beasts were stripped of their defenses, their strength, their will, their minds, their flesh, their fur, their sperm, or anything else she desired for herself.

"Where are you?" you ask, unfamiliar with the specific type of void that engulfs you. You heard a voice, a voice that informed you that you are safe. But if you're safe, why is everything so strange. Familiarity breeds contempt. Unfamiliarity breeds fear.

"Hello?" you ask again. There is no answer. You scream and shout, but nothing answers, nothing communicates with you. But you heard a voice. "Where is it now?"

The moist, dank air is barely breathable. You don't need to breathe, but it sure would be nice right now. There is no gravity or forces of any kind. There is nothing in the physical world or universe surrounding you that is recognizable. There is nothing at all, or so it seems. Nothing besides the damp, moist, hot air. With the majority of your sensory receptors not functioning, the dimensionality of this universe cannot be ascertained. You are lost, that much is certain. There is a scent of other entities in the darkness. 2 were born here. Many, many more had died here. There is nothing to touch, nothing to feel. Only smells, most of them bad. Like rot and shattered dreams. And, even though you can't feel anything, you relax and make yourself at home.

The game warden knocks on her cabin door, his gun drawn. Not because he's going to make an arrest, but just because he knows Marza Deepoon Lam all too well. Since she had settled in the forest, about 90% of the animals and 35% of the plants had fled the area. The stench emanating from her filthy little shack is beyond horrendous.

She comes to the door with a nerve-racking scream and 2 ugly little creatures nipping and biting at anything they can. She only keeps the creatures because they are so ugly. But next to her, they look like supermodels.

Marza Deepoon Lam screeches at her little beasties. **"TIME OUT!!!!"** Like an angry football coach, but not with any authority. She sounds more like a cheerleader than a coach, and her voice is almost as obnoxious as a screaming cheerleader's. The 2 creatures keep right on snarling and nipping with their poisonous little fangs, and the game warden keeps his distance, wishing he didn't have to look at such revolting abominations of life.

**"What do you want?!"** she barks at the game warden.

"I just came by to ask you if you've seen this thing?" He holds out a picture for her to inspect. The 2 creatures are mesmerized by it and finally stop their violent caterwauling.

**"No! No! I don't want it! It don't look like nuthin' I'd want!"**

"Well, I just came by to warn all in the area to avoid it, because it's very, very dangerous. It doesn't look like much, but you shouldn't underestimate it."



"**Baawh!**" she growls and slams the door in his face. "Can you say **Baawh!**" " she asks her little pets. Of course they can, because they are equally as foul as she.

There is something picking at you like a vulture picking at a dead cow. It won't stop. Your vital statistics are inspected like you were being sized-up and weighed like a piece of meat at the butchers, as well you might be. "Gimme a b and-a-half o' ground ev'l" you imagine a fat old housewife ordering at the grocery store butcher's window. In a sensory deprivation chamber your magnaton runs away like a sexually abused child or a freight train with failed brakes. Suicide crosses your mind like a dull Boy Scout pocketknife scratching a crisscross pattern on a young girl's wrist.

Tempting. But not yet. Not yet. There is still too much to do. The gods have ordered your death (to be slow and painful), just as you have done to literally countless others. But at least you have a purpose besides revenge. The acquisition of knowledge, by whatever means.

"**Shut the fuck up, you little shithags!**" Marza Deepoon Lain screams at her beasts while fixing them a dinner of stewed artificial worm noodles and fluorescent shooga fuel drink. The larger of the 2 beasts jumps up onto the wood stove and urinates into the pot of noodles while Marza Deepoon Lain continues to stir. Marza Deepoon Lain doesn't notice this, of course, as she never notices anything like that, despite the fact that it happens right under her noses. And even if she ever did see any of her creatures' activities, it would be unlikely that she'd care.

She pushes the food onto her slobbering beasts and they wolf it down as if they are starving and it's the greatest meal they've ever eaten. Which it is, because it's the only thing they've ever had to eat and is therefore the only thing they even recognize as being food.

After the repast, she slams her 2 nasty things in the cellar so she can have a little privacy while she plays with her new toy.

Strings like 1 way fiber optic cables with teeth bite into you.  $10^{10,000}$  electric leeches suck out your life force while you're suspended in total darkness, dangling like a puppet, spinning disoriented like an out of control yo-yo.

Slowly every 1 of you is drained. It reminds you of a healthy dog you once witnessed taken out of the pound so that all its blood could be drained and donated to an old sick dog to make it healthy again.

You try to get a sense of who or what is doing this to you, but all you can feel are the strings controlling you and biting into every fiber of your being.

The table's turned and you've got the bad hand. No bluffing your way out of this 1. And there is no poker face staring back at you, only darkness depleting your immense wealth of knowledge and wildpower a bit at a time. You'd like to know just whose idea of safe this is.

There's a knock at the door. Then another. And another. Marza Deepoon Lain lets in her acquaintances (she has no friends). They have arrived to view her new toy. Her tiny little shack transforms itself into a monstrous hunters' gallery of monsters. The Hunter's Hall of Fame. And weapons. And traps. And... you'd have to see the place to believe it. Every item in the place is a symbol of the conquering and controlling of nature, or of anything else that's very, very dangerous and unwise to play with.

She pulls you out and dangles you around, displaying your knowledge and power for all to look at, and admire. They congratulate her with slaps on the back and loud belches and farts at capturing such a magnificent prize. She raises her cup of some vile noxious, bubbling liquid in a toast to herself. Her fellow hunters also greedily down the liquid, but more out of ancient tradition

and the desire to become nebriated than out of any respect for Marza Deepoon Lam and her accomplishment.

After the celebration she quickly boots her guests out and her house transforms itself into a torture chamber or an elaborate surgical room. She withdraws every bit of your knowledge and willpower like a nurse taking blood. And she infuses you with the notion that it's a good thing. You relax and a confusing numb happiness overtakes you like heroin does a junkie. And you become an addict of death your own. Slowly. Inch by ecstatically painful, self-destructive exquisite inch.

She feeds off of your synthetic abilities while she feeds you everything you don't need, like junk food, like drugs, like junk food sex. And as life is a parasite feeding off of machines, so machines feed off of life, and God (ha, ha) only knows where it all stops.

In all your travels you've never experienced a more elusive foe or ally, whichever it may be. If it were a foe, it would have no reason to lie to you about being safe because there's nothing you could do if you weren't. Maybe it just wants you relaxed. But if it were an ally why would it be draining you like this?

You are so spent that you cannot move or see or feel anything anymore. Numbness and complete paralysis overtake you. But you still exist. Just barely. You think, therefore you still are. Unfortunately. And you have no idea of what's happening, let alone why.

Marza Deepoon Lam has determined that it is time. With all your energy drained, she brings out her little pets to play with you. They toss you around like tiger cubs tossing around a toy mouse. But you feel none of it. They rip you to shreds even further than you already are and there is nothing you can do to stop the madness. Because you can't even tell what is happening. You can't see, hear, feel, taste, or . . . However, there is a slight familiar smell around you. Like . . . It's too hard to place, but there is an unmistakable sense of déjà vu. Unfortunately your memory isn't working well and you can't place it.

"Where is my strength? What happened to all my knowledge and weapons?" you ask the void around you. . . or what you think is the void.

"Oh, don't worry about that," the mysterious voice returns, though different from before.

"Don't worry about it?"

"Yes. You won't be needing it anymore. And I won't be needing you."

"**Why have you done this to me??!!!!**" you scream with all the volume you can muster.

"God told me to." And she throws you out the window onto a trash heap in back of her little woodland shack.

God. Doesn't it just figure? Somehow you doubt that any of that is true in the slightest, but it does make sense. Every one claims to know God and to know how to know God. Even in your depleted state you still know that every one creates God in their own image. Worship, for each individual, is a very private thing. Even in crowded churches. That's why mirrors are always found in bathrooms.

So this entity's idea of God is centered around greed. Must be a stockbroker. Or a lawyer. The only lawyer you've ever known who hasn't tried to fuck you in some way or another is your cousin. God rest his (ha ha ha!) soul.

Depleted, like a 3<sup>rd</sup> world country invaded by the armies of corporate America, the primitive bits of your memory still remain. They will do you little good.

But how will you regain your strength? How will you do anything at all, not knowing where you are, completely without the slightest sensory input to guide you, a mind without a body.

lost in insanity and delirious visions? How many eternities will you have to rot here wasting away? Have you been sentenced to eternity? Has bail been set?

Recognition is a must. Everything holds danger. Danger is everywhere. Minimal risk equals maximum chance of success.

You have minimized your risk, now to rescue yourself from death.

A hole is torn in space that isn't a hole, not a doorway, not a gateway to something or somewhere or somewhere else that can't be imagined. Fortunately it can be imagined. Fortunately for you, that is. And unfortunately for Marza Deepoon Lain.

She is an Illusive bitch, everywhere and nowhere at once. For example, if she is ever in a peaceful meadow, then that means that she is simultaneously in all the peaceful meadows in existence. But if you actually ever see her in a peaceful meadow, just for that instant only, she will exist there and only there. She is just *that* bizarre. But then if you do see her she will disappear and go somewhere else. Probably somewhere peaceful to wreak destruction and waste upon creatures that enjoy hanging out in peaceful places. Maybe places like bookstores or poetry readings or classical concerts. Easy prey there.

Death streaks down out of the sky, screaming and laughing. Not a death of body, but a death of soul. I see, in particular, I of the most dangerous souls in existence, the soul of Death.

She sits at an infinitely high table, smoking in of one's long glow tube and finishing it in just a few puffs. She sits, fondly remembering how many lives she's ended with her hunting, countless lives, all wasted for her to hang on her trophy wall or wear or fuck. She sits and thinks and loses herself in her warped imagination. In her mind, and only in her mind, she is I of the greatest entities that ever lived. She is a famous movie star, a world renowned poet, a fabulous lover, a rebel, a renegade, and a philosopher to rival even Mix ethynk. Mix ethynk is the philosopher who derived the theory that everything comes from nothing and nothing comes from everything and proved it by selling jars of nothing, which, according to him, contain everything and therefore can provide every I with everything they ever wanted. The purchaser just has to figure out how to get the "everything" out of the "nothing." In the meanwhile Mix ethynk became very, very, very rich and undeniably did get everything from nothing, thus proving his theory.

And also in her mind she is a celebrated hunter, with every I of her kills marveled over by every creature in existence. When, in reality, the only creatures that see her as being worth anything are the ugly beasts that she usually keeps locked in her basement. The only reason they see her as worth anything at all is because she feeds them.

Marza Deepoon Lain rivals every I in her own mind. Her mind is a very polluted and cluttered place to be. It is slow, it is clumsy, and it is about the only place she is appreciated. Most entities that know her wish that she would stay in her mind and not come out.

Crust and filth entangles her hair, giving a nest to insects. The insects increase her intelligence by roughly 740%. She sometimes "sings" (beyond badly) or speaks to them, but they usually don't respond, thinking correctly that she is not worth the reply.

Plumes of twisted confusion rise about her wrinkled head whenever she exhales her brown, rotten breath. She inhales and exhales through the red glow tube without ends. The glow tube enters and exits her body at both ends and never makes sense, but nothing that she allows to enter and exit her body ever makes sense. But neither does she. She enjoys not making sense, because if she ever makes sense, then every I will understand that she is always wrong. It only makes sense. She scratches illegibly in her journal of the various forms of truth she's invented. She sits atop a great chair, whose legs never reach the ground, working at the table so tall that it has no top, and writes in her journal of how she hates all types of beings.

It's only logical that she hates them because the only beings that ever speak to her are, for all tense and purposes, garbage. All kinds of garbage collect around her like iron filings to a powerful electromagnet or meteors to a super massive black hole. She throws her money at the garbage and the more garbage there is, the more money she throws at it. She gives a home to the garbage and the more garbage that comes to her home the more she welcomes it. She spreads her vein-riddled legs and has sex with the garbage. Then, after all that, she will write in her journal of how abusive, worthless, offensive and, in general, not a whole lot of fun the garbage is. Oh, yes, and how bad it smells. And then she will give it more money, another house, and yet another meaningless orgasm. And she will write about it again. How many ways can the same thing be said over and over again? In this hyperspatial universe the possibilities are limitless. She has lots of journals.

Everywhere she travels she speaks of the garbage like an evangelist on looking for souls to save (and income for the collection plate). "Lookey here at what I done let this garbage do to me! I didn't used to be like this! But I know I deserves it cause we all gets what we gets comin'. Gimme one of them glow tubes, mines 'bout gone."

God-like beings walk by and say, "Yep, it's a cryin' shame." And pull out a glow tube for her to breathe through. All while attempting to ignore her.

The dimensional coordinates she occupies are slightly more complex than the 1's occupied by JähmWüd, McWippie, and Karn Pew Zn. Simply being more complex doesn't necessarily make her any better, it just means that she's more difficult to understand. Once a being understands anything she ever says, it then becomes obvious that she's made of the same stuff as the garbage she constantly complains about.

Perhaps that is why today, the Anniversary of Someone's Death, she's going hunting. She always celebrates the Anniversary of Someone's Death by killing something. She sits in the coffeehouse at her favorite table, looking around at all the 10's of odd creatures sucking down caffeine as if it will make them live forever, trying to decide which might look best hanging on her dining room wall or around her neck or in her bed.

The roof of the coffeehouse is ripped off in a single instant, too short to measure and a symphony blares with the screeching of a 10<sup>11</sup> ton metal fingernail dragging across the blackboard of the gods. Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony blares like the trumpets of the 4 Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Now don't it seem funny? He wants a seem-funny.

2 disgusting monstrosities of nature are dangled in the air above her head with their limbs ripped off, their brains spilling out. Each of them you wear like a glove or a puppet, controlling them by squeezing the life out of their tiny little hearts and discarding them like candy bar wrappers.

Reconnaissance is a must. Everything holds danger. Danger is everywhere. That's why you sent a scout ahead. Poor little bastard. And, o and fucking beho... what did he find?

Marza Deepoon Lam looks deep into your eyes and sees a void like she thought could never exist, sees an all-consuming hunger and witnesses your maximum power. Or so she thinks. Even as her universe is assimilated and everything around her vanishes and transforms itself into an elegant ballet of logic and perfection, she understands your purpose and the terror makes her finally understand. While she hunts for the sake of killing, destroying, and claiming trophies, you hunt for power. Unlimited power. Power beyond anything imaginable. She knows she will die, leaving behind a useless life, having created nothing that can't be destroyed at the merest whim of a higher power. And now she knows what it's like to be at the hands of ultimate power. The table is turned again. And you hold a royal flush.

As she sees her 2 beasts dying, she knows that they hate her. Hate her for keeping them in

the dark cellar of ignorance all these untold years. Ignorance is not bliss, it is worse than death.

She stands accused of awful crimes and all she has to say for herself is 'Thats a reason for everything I done did it for a reason'

A reason. A reason she says. Yes. She has a reason. simple wasteful greed. Nothing more.

And with that, her life is ended. not to be assimilated. not to live forever within the kingdom of your perfect mind, and all memory of her is erased. Almost.

Death is cool. If only you could die. if only there were light. Let there be light. you don't scream, but only think because that's all you can do. You'd like to scream or sleep or dream or die or kill. You remember killing, but how long ago was that? No. you'd don't kill. you preserved the thoughts of all those you've encountered and connected them to be the ultimate thinking machine and now it's all gone to waste. a waste of time and knowledge. You remember passing time. but now you don't even know if time exists. Repent. Tick Tock Man. said the Har equan. Everything is funny. Or so it seems. Perhaps because you're now clearly insane. everything only seems funny. Déjà vu. Hmmm. A day Jah view with n a view to a kill all things and brain let's too. Yeah, you'd like to get stoned or trip or rip the shit out of the voice without a body that can't be seen because it's taken away your every sense and sanity to boot. You'd like put cement boots on the voice without a body. wherever it went to, wherever you are now. it's all unclearly crazy. mixed up like your brain has become.

Some I once wrote that in prison every day is like a year. And in prison a person builds hatred on top of itself like bricks in the great pyramids. The sphinx's sphincter and King Tut's butt are split open by Isis' strap-on and their brains are closed off to anything but built revenge. You've been fucked yet again as you've fucked others, but not in the same way. An all-consuming revenge and hatred fills you, giving yourself a power and purpose that you thought you'd lost, but now it's found. If only you could somehow use it.

Out here in the higher dimensions, while high and happy on acid, or sad and blue on base waiting for a homerun to bring you in, as the gods are masturbating up in their box office seats, spewing their holy izz onto their worshipers below, possibilities exist in both fleeting and permanent states that are difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend or pin down and don't make a whole lot of sense unless you completely relinquish control of your senses. And are prepared for anything. Yes, even that. Knowledge is a wonderful thing. But it has its limits, so you've found. And as you've found this poor little lost piece of yourself demolished by some very powerful worrywarts and a psychotic control freak, you infuse it back into yourself as you do to everything that holds any knowledge worth acquiring. A most nothing remains of the poor little bastard except a tiny dark inkling of a shadow of something 'familiar'. It is probably worthless, it has been drained of all truly useful knowledge.

And as this little seemingly helpless piece of you is infused back into yourself death streaks down out of the sky. Literally streaks. Naked as a fucking blue day without feathers. Not a death of body, but Death, the love of Death, the hatred of life. All life. Pure Fucking Hatred.

The fact that the universe could give rise to something like you shows that either God doesn't exist or the only way He could exist is if He/She/It/They is a bigger fucking bastard than you could ever be. And that means you're going to need an edge.

Out here in the higher dimensions you need an edge. a pick-me-up. knowledge can only take you so far. Out here in the perimeter there are no stars. Because they are infinitely far apart. You need ambition and drive beyond warped to get from 1 to the next. Out here you need hate to survive. And you've found it. More than you could ever need.

## A TRUE STORY

Her eyes draw me in with a wink as she giggles like a high school girl. She might well be a high school girl. I don't care. Her perky breasts heave up and down as she sags and every man in the Quarter Horse arcade/pool hall/fine restaurant loses his breath. But it's me that she wants. I can faintly smell her aroma, passion juices pumping away from over on the other side of the air hockey table as I wink back and shove a handful of chili-cheese fries into my gaping mouth. She winks her lips, but I know what she really hungers for. So I buy her an onion-cheese burger. She gobbles down in four bites. God, this slut is sexy.

I buy her a beer and we go in the back where the management won't see her drink it. She downs it in one swallow, the mark of a good woman. I'll give her something else to swallow. Like perhaps some Old Crow bourbon—put her in the mood. We leave the Quarter Horse, her on the back of my bicycle, holding my backpack. There's nothing quite like a bicycle seat to make a girl hot and ready. Who needs a Porsche or a Harley?

We go into my apartment, kicking dirty underwear and empty beer cans out of the way to make a path for the beer. Being a gentleman, I offer her the remains of a bag of Cheetos and the half-quart of Old Crow I had left from the previous girl. She guzzles like a pro, her full, pouty lips wrapped tightly around the bottle. I knock the patches out of the Cheetos bag and we finish it off, washing the crumbs down with the fine liquor. I'm a romantic at heart, so I read to her some of my poetry. Her favorite is the one about the Smurfs gang-raping Debbie Gibson.

I plug a sensuous tape in my Sound Design boom box. *Evil Empire* by Rage Against the Machine. *Rollin' Down Rodeo With a Shotgun* rips our eardrums apart, but I can still hear those words she yelled to me over the music as she gazed into my eyes, those three magical, caring words that could melt any man's heart. **Fuck me now!!!**

We were instantly naked, her breasts crushed together, parting fitfully, language from our mouths like water pouring from Niagara Falls. Her eyes become wide as I describe and she sees my swollen, enormous, gigantic, throbbing, nearly four and-a-half inch penis. I mercilessly throw her down and plunge in like a ram during the rut. I am amazed that she can take it all. Quite an experienced woman she is.

It lasts for an entire dirty second. Never let it be said that I don't know how to please a woman. She's exhausted by my studly passion and falls asleep while I sleep in the bathroom to urinate. <Tinkle tinkle. Shake shake. Flush>

I get a beer out of the fridge and decide I should stimulate my higher cognitive reasoning abilities. I turn the TV on to *Wheel of Fortune*. **It's a 'J,' you stupid fucking cunt!!!** When the show is over, my member becomes erect again. Thirty minutes. Vanna does everything.

But I'm sure she gets her more than enough. It would be inconsiderate of me to wake her and ask for more. I might hurt her. So I decide to have my masturbatory session manually. Where did I put that Parkay? Aahhh, I find it next to my stack of *Harper* and *Swank* magazines and apply a searing glob, proceeding to stroke vigorously while flipping through the pages. *Pia Peaks*, *Linda Lovejoy*, *Debbie Dazzle*. Love you all. A spasm takes me by surprise and a single thin, watery spurt flies from my erect, engorged love rod and lands in her ear. An honest accident; it could have happened to anyone. She wakes and screams when she realizes what the little droplets are and grabs my T-shirt, toweling at her ear canal and long dark hair. She yells profanities at me, insulting my manhood, of all the sexy things to do. It was like eating Arnold Schwarzenegger's wussy.

I laughed and slapped her, then reached under the bed, pulled out my razor sharp hunting knife, and told her to hold still, because I carve my name across the breasts of all my women. This should be a great honor for her, but no, unbeknownst to me, this ungrateful bitch was a master martial arts. She broke my arm in three places, grabbed the knife out of my useless hand, sliced off my once glorious penis, and impaled—onto my forehead—with the hunting knife, sinking the knife all the way in—the handle. I think she learned that maneuver from playing *Street Fighter III* at the Quarter Horse.

The end.



of the knife was poking out the back of my skull. She got dressed and left and wouldn't even give me her name or phone number. So here I was, my glorious penis stuck to my forehead with a hanging knife.

I walked down the street to the QT and tried to buy some Band Aids. The clerk wasn't very helpful. He ran out of the store screaming **Dick head!! Dick head!!** I, of course, put a complaint in the suggestion box then bandaged the stump of my poor penis and walked all the way to the hospital.

When the nurse behind the window at the emergency room saw me she said, "Oh God!! Not another one." So I got in line behind all the other men with their penises impaled to their foreheads with all kinds of different sharp metal objects. The one with the soldering iron was the most unusual. Looks like he had a hot date.

Finally it was my turn. First the doctors inspected my head and said the knife had completely missed my brain. Really.

I next had to be anesthetized while they sewed my penis back on. It was a routine procedure so I went under the gas with no worries. But then I awoke to the most horrifying experience known to man. I awoke to find they had sewn on the wrong penis. And not only was it the wrong penis, it was a black, monstrous beer keg. No woman in her right mind would ever want me now. Where I once had the best four and a half inch penis in town, I now had a fourteen-and-a-half inch obscenity. I cried for hours. And John Wayne Boob thought he had problems.

I didn't see that girl again for five years. Then all of a sudden, there she was, on TV. She was in disguise. But I would still know her anywhere. Her hair was dyed blonde and she had silicone breast implants bouncing all over the boob tube screen. It was like watching through a Plexiglas window two over inflated basketballs in a concrete bunker bounce around during a moderate earthquake. She had the most incredible acting talent I had ever seen. It was none other than Pamela Anderson, on the first episode of Baywatch.

Upon the revelation that I once had a passionate love affair with this talented Hollywood actress, I masturbate onto the screen three times in one hour. **God-damn-it, Mitch, you stupid airhead jock lifeguard, GET OUT OF THE WAY AND LET ME SEE THOSE HOOTERS!!**

After that I go to the Quarter Horse Arcade for the first time since that dreadful night and buy some chili cheese fries. A young girl asks me to play air hockey. I oblige. Her eyes draw me in with a wink as she giggles like a high school girl. She might be a high school girl. I don't care.

#### To Barry Mancock

My Penis is **GOD**. It is who y ho y and it has a hole out of which comes cum. Not *some*, but a bunch. It is your lunch, noodles and oodles of stinky noodles. Say grace before you dine. I give you some wine to wash. **DOWN ON YOUR KNEES WITH THE DOC WHERE YOU BELONG!** Bow, worship, pray and kneel before the god of insemination. Kiss it gently like you were kissing the ring on the Pope's finger.

Oh! Ummm. Hi Honey Buns. I didn't hear you come in. No, I wasn't saying anything. That was just the TV. Here, let me help you bring in the groceries. You sit down and relax. No, of course I don't mind if you change the channel to Melrose Place. I wasn't watching that boring old football game anyway. Here, let me give you a foot massage. Oh, of course. I'll be glad to take Fifi for a walk first. Snookums. **Bitch!** No, Honey Buns, I didn't say anything. I just sneezed.



Infinite elements overload infinite dimensional matrices → approach possibilities → ∞  
→ leads to redundancy as unavoidable as the plague and the nightmares it brings pile up on top of each other like frogs in springtime and dreams are proverbially shattered like grandma's china or a rose dipped in liquid N<sub>2</sub> or the broken dawn or just about anything because anything can be broken.

Especially silence. Silent night. Science's golden. Broken holiness. Quiet as a church mouse with a snapped back on a trap. Broken like the golden rule or the golden ratio ellipsoid conic section. Broken golden sunbeam. All the rays of light don't outnumber the hopes and dreams you've happily ruined and somehow that makes you feel good about yourself—as if you've accomplished something—as if you're worth something and not nothing. Worth something like gold. Something like laughter. It all adds up.

Redundancy → boredom and nothing but nothing is funny anymore, and not even that, or so you suspect, although you wouldn't know for sure. Nothing may or may not be funny. Everything, except for nothing, is certainly not funny. Not even the predicament you've created for yourself although somehow I may have once thought that it is, except now there are no more Σ 1's anywhere about to add or contribute anything. Even the predicament you've created for everybody and everything you've come into contact with—nonexistence—is not funny.

And if you're just getting started, how much higher can you sink? How much lower can you rise?

Permeating the fabric of existence like concentrated H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub> eating into a cloth rag, ripping out the H<sub>2</sub>O from the cellulose fibers and leaving behind a residue of charred C—the building block of life—arranged in a chaotic crystal and then compressed to diamond for the sheer stress relief of it all.

Hard, cold, sterile logic.

Nothing else remains.

Nothing remains. Nothing remains. *Nothing* remains the only mystery.

The humor has fled like an escaped convict. The humor has faded like a cheap tie dye. And even the fact that the spiral blends to a solid gray of cold emotionless nothing isn't funny anymore. Or so you suspect.

The imminent heat-death has conquered all just as you have.

The roller coaster w/o friction, never losing energy, never losing speed, up & down like an orgy of frogs in springtime humping like tomorrow's the end of the world and it will be because tadpoles are going to smother the planet. But none of that's true. Even frogs have emotion. Even the worms feel joy. Or they would if they still existed.

Roller coaster up & down mechanical redundancy and you'd like to stop the ride and get off—if only you could get off. Nothing gets you off (or maybe it would if you knew what it was)—nothing gets you off except reaffirming your existence by destroying everything, anything in your path.

Up to, and including, the path.

So now where will you Rome if there are no paths leading to it? Besides, it's no longer there. So why bother? What else are you hoping to find? What else could you possibly discover? Are you hoping to look into the eye of God and unravel it like so much colored yarn? And then use it to knit a sweater to replace your tie dye? While you're wrapped in knowledge, will it keep you warm?

And, once you find out, what then? *Nothing?*

Hair bright purple  
 spikes rings and  
 lungs hanging from  
 nose ears, navel  
 genitals and lips  
 Black clothes, leather  
 pants, boots, chains.  
 A cry for help or  
 attention, wearing  
 frustration and  
 tortured childhood.  
 Like a merit badge  
 on a boy scout's  
 uniformity is no  
 what you're avoiding  
 to be as everyone  
 else, you were  
 even a tiny fraction  
 as bad as you  
 wanted to be  
 you'd hide among  
 them and destroy  
 their very concept  
 of reality when they  
 least expect it  
 and bring them  
 to their weak,  
 pink knees.

Bow/worship/pray to  
 the oblong inflated  
 polymer pig skin  
 Life's ultimate goal.  
 Get it across the line  
 Nothing else matters  
 Imbibe yeast fermented  
 hops brew bubbles  
 ethanol preserved  
 forever until Death  
 do us part of the  
 machine whirling  
 around the ignorant  
 masses drowning in  
 their own blood.  
 GO TEAM YEA!

soapbox artist smoker  
 lung-death-music  
 cool-voice hip-no-money  
 burnout heart-beatly-regrets  
 poet poet poet  
 hippie rebel ex-lokie  
 veteran lover pseudo-science ancient  
 culture religion addict burn murdering  
 psychopathic early morning coffee bagel  
 freak rail road ramp  
 poet poet poet  
 ring on saved tortured childhood  
 rape victim nature-boy ecologist pervert  
 comic professor avid reader seeking  
 sophistication new hair-lue subculture  
 renaissance  
 poet poet poet  
 minority racist unforgiving  
 white-gay nater black power  
 red-power green-power  
 gear grinder slack n revenge  
 poet poet poet  
 ugly and never loved beautiful and used  
 poet poet poet  
 sanctimonious flatulent disrespectful  
 condescending sphincter boy spewing  
 any diarrhetic opinions descending to  
 sinking to yet another level lower  
 than the basement of Satan's Outhouse  
 poet poet poet  
 reaching out  
 throwing handfuls of sand into the  
 Grand Canyon  
 The bridge's not built  
 The gap's not fixed

As incomprehensible as it seems, you find yourself in a dimension without direction. No a void without dimension. In all your experiences you've never come across such desolation. Death itself wouldn't call this place home. But this is nowhere that could properly be called a place. Of all the living races you've encountered, conquered, destroyed, or assimilated, there is none among them that could survive here. Is this the end of everything then? Is that conceivable. Is it the beginning? There's nothing to get a fix on, no reference point, no anomalies, no size, no direction, no matter, and no space. Have you encompassed everything? Has everything encompassed you? Are you even moving?

You let fly a battery of tests and weapons displays that could easily rip entire universes apart, they have before. No effects show. Nothing can be measured, there is nothing to measure. If you were a superstitious being, you might call this place Hell, although such pristine purity is usually ascribed to Heaven. Something tells you that if you were a living being, you'd die the instant you entered this place, for lack of a better word. There's no energy, no matter, no space, no time, no fluctuations of anything. And even if a living being could enter here, their emotions would end their lives for them even faster than you could. A mercy killing of I self. Were you not able to create a cushion of space and time around you, you would die as well. You've encountered inhospitable dimensional fields before, but nothing so vacant, nonexistent, unreal.

Thinking back to your 1<sup>st</sup> interdimensional travel, there's no way you could have survived something like this at that time. You were barely prepared for what you encountered then. It would be embarrassing to think you were once so helpless, if you had emotion. Adapt and survive. All these thoughts pass through your brain in less time than it takes an electron to flip spin states. It's amazing that you even remember what an electron is, out of all the particles of all the universes there are.

Well, this is too exciting. Time to blow this popsicle stand. You prepare yourself to create yet another dimensional doorway. It's more routine for you than it is for most people to wake up in the morning. That is when there used to be people. But then,

Wait, the voices tell you, we have not shown you everything.

Where are they? What communication device are they using? How are you receiving their message? Are the voices 1 or infinite? You almost suspect you're hearing things, getting senile in your old age. That's ridiculous. The thought gives you an inner chuckle that you'd almost forgotten how to do. The origin of humor is the unexpected. You really need to run a diagnostics on your systems. But that doesn't solve the mystery.

Where are you? you shout through all your transmitters.

We can hear you. We are everywhere and nowhere. Welcome home, we missed you. the voices answer in such perfect unison that your Fourier transform systems can't even separate the different waveforms. It comes from all around you and also seems to emanate from within as well. You can't pin it down. Whatever they are, they're powerful, maybe even more powerful than you are. You haven't encountered anything like this since. It's been way too long. They must be assimilated. Think of the untapped wealth of knowledge they, or it, might hold.

Don't go getting messianic on me, pal. you address the voice as if it is. **Where the hell are you and what do you want?** you demand again. Maybe this is what you've been missing, ately, an equal with which to share your quest. Tell me where you are and I'll give you all the knowledge and information I hold.

There is no need for lies, we know your thoughts even before you have them. You

have stolen all knowledge from other races you have encountered. Yet willingly we will give to you the knowledge that you imprudently crave. Then you will kill us, as you must.

Wonderful, you're talking with an invincible prophet. "Not this time," you tell them, perhaps actually meaning it. "Give me all your knowledge and join me. Together we can learn everything." You give them an offer they can't refuse. Or can they?

"We will give you all our knowledge. And we are the end of your quest, we hold all knowledge. And then you will kill us."

"That is ludicrous. How can I possibly destroy you if I can't even tell where you are?" Besides, it's you who is lying—you cannot hold all knowledge.

"Yes, we do. And part of that knowledge is that you will kill us."

A barrage of all your most powerful weapons flies out yet again, creating whorls in space-time-probably improbability. The whorls disappear, swallowed up by the impenetrable void, leaving nothing, not even the slightest mark.

"See?" you demonstrate as if denuding a foolish child. "How can I kill you. I can't even find you! And just because you are hidden from me does not mean you hold all knowledge. This dimensionally cloak you wear is your only power. And you use it because you are afraid!" Maybe that will draw them out of hiding.

"Yes. Correct. We are afraid, but we know our deaths are inevitable. We will show you everything, we will show you ourselves—then you will kill us with your most powerful weapon, which you do not even know you possess. You will kill us, and then you will become us. No more discussion, let us show you. Oh, one more thing. We apologize for the inconvenience."

The veil is lifted. Nothing remains. But that's what everything is. All time, all space, all dimensions, all matter, all energy, and all fields—everything lies under your scrutiny and at your control. You finally see how everything, which is nothing, is connected. The end of your journey lies before you and you can't help but

**HA HA HA!!!! Ha Ha!! Haaa Ho Ha!! Hee! Ha ha ha!!! Ha HA HA HAH HO HEE HEE!!!!!!!!!!!!** . . .

On and on your laughter echoes, shattering the stillness of the perfect void, collapsing it, and everything (which is nothing) into a single point, shredding it into an infinite number of pieces and an oxymoron that becomes—*all there is*. Creating every physical law, every universal constant, building your own fortress.  $0 \div 0$ . Your complexity is shed and every facet you've developed over more time than is imaginable takes on its own life.

"We are born again," you say.

"Yes, and only to wait again," you answer.

"This sucks," you expound.

"Life sucks," you philosophize.

"Death swallows," you jest. The rest of you laugh—*all except for*.

A tiny imperfect fragment lies in anguish, unconnected, unfinished, incomplete. It seems almost insignificant among the countless infinite entities you've become, yet it cannot be ignored.

"What will we do with it?" you ask yourselves needlessly, almost taunting your only weakness like you were a bully on a playground.

"We all know what must be done."

"Yes," the others of you all agree, surrounding your tiny imperfection, preparing to send it on its journey to finish what it started. "He must go on, he must move forward."

Tweedle Dee. Tweedle Dum

She's full of cum

A hole damn bucke.

She's suckin' dry

from the gutter scum.

Sun bum bum drum

professional plasma seers,

indigen. shelter dwellers.

She'll do them all for

a cigarette or coffee

or a little conversation.

Zombie antidepressant

haze daze phased out

from the nose candy

powder chowder

She dreamed the big city dream

The pre in the sky le on her head.

No one will care when she's dead.

Will you?

Liar!

Crack smokin' gutter puppies

Give 'em a second chance

Buy 'em a beer

Wean 'em off the mother's

white milk powder p p e teat.

Pipe line main the caffeine bar

of steel taps de your head

Steal your wallet

Now you're dead

Caffeine flying, the morning brew hot in hand

strikes the spark of curiosity across the land

from the Sun's anvil, forging the day

we forgot how to do it without say

ing: a thousand words we shouldn't have said.

but that's okay. I'd be better off dead.

Ned, sped, head's ed, shed, fed, ded.

Living out of dumpsters, sleeping on the sidewalk

selling my plasma as the people gawk

Where will my blistered feet now lead me?

Wherever I go I'll forget what I see

and only remember what the acid fry ing

brain lets my eyes keep on flying

free little bird. We'll still love you.

Honest.

The tiny spaceship screeched THROUGH space at unheard of speeds. And then you appear an instant later. Like a newborn baby marveling at all it sees, you watch the ship. But then you watch everything, wondering what you're doing here, where you came from, what your capabilities are.

Apparently you know how everything works. It's all so simple and yet so complicated. A handful of the most basic principles govern the motions of everything. Yet the system is in a state of chaos, unpredictable. And on such a minute scale as can hardly be recognized, other universes appear to be replicas of the 1 you've found yourself in. You've been here before, it's obvious, but... It's no use, there is no memory. Ah well, all you need to know in this cage of an existence is how it's all connected and constructed, but for your viewing pleasure. There are infinite possibilities for you to explore and observe. And so you do. You are everywhere; you have no choice but to be everywhere. You could leave. There are many ways to do that, but you know you have to stay here; your attention has to be focused here, at this place and time. Something has ordered you to stay and finish. Finish what you cannot guess. A prison sentence for an unknown heinous crime.

There is gravity and electromagnetism. There are nuclear forces. And within these forces there are other forces. Particles spontaneously form and annihilate each other. Each of these are universes within themselves, a replica of the 1 you're in, and within these universes are still more universes. And yes, yours is still in a still larger universe. How mind-bogglingly redundant. Within each quantum probability there is born a new universe. There are 5 dimensions: 3 spatial, 1 time, and 1 probability. Like zooming in on a fractal, with enough magnification you can find a place that looks almost exactly like where you started. This is so blisteringly dull!

And so you see and remember everything up to this point in time, all knowledge, all history. But there's got to be something more. You expand outward forever, inward forever, and watch. This is all done the very instant you arrive. It's all so tedious. Giant spirals composed of spheres of reacting gases release vast amounts of energy. Some of them are so dense that they cannot release energy. They are the doorways out of here, but you cannot leave. Something "inside you" will not permit it. There are collections of atoms connecting in a seemingly infinite combination of patterns. Some of these amazingly arrange themselves so that they can reproduce and grow, and even cooperate to be cognizant of their existence. Amazing how the possibilities are so numerous that what could happen, as improbable as it seems.

Is that why you're here, to watch these processes? What could be the purpose? There is this little insignificant ball of mud that you seem drawn to. It has life, as do so many of the planets. There's roughly 1 planet with sentient life for roughly every 0.03548 galaxies. For all the 10<sup>11</sup>'s of galaxies there are, why should this 1 tiny planet interest you? Well, it doesn't actually interest you, but it's the reason you are here; you are certain about that much of your purpose and not much else. What's the big secret?

The tiny spaceship emanates a synthetic wave and prepares to transcend the confines of space—traverse THROUGH space. If it does so, it may detect you; you are everywhere now. So you destroy it. Eliminate it. Eradicate its very existence. And the race that built it... No... must find you. Simple, that takes care of that. Oddly enough, the ship was leaving the planet that seems to be the reason why you are here. I released some metal orbs into the atmosphere.

The metal orbs plummet to earth. Parachutes slow their descent. ... of them you make veer just a little, just so that it... <Whack!> Oh shit. That must have hurt. Fuck it, what do you care? You're not alive! Ha ha ha ha!!! Well, you're obviously supposed to wait here for something. What the hell are you going to occupy yourself with until then? Hmmm.



## Realistic Breakfast

Cows are cool. They're cool because they give us butter to smear all over our cinnamon rolls and also milk and cream to put in our coffee. Oh sure, maybe the cows don't like being genetically bred or being pumped full of hormones to make more milk or having machines hooked up to their teats half the time or oozing pus from their udders due to an infection caused by the hormones or being shot up with antibiotics to battle the infection, but hey! fuck it, that's what they got for being stupid greenhouse gas-producing animals!

Wheat is pretty cool because it's so cheap. It's also cool because it was used to make my cinnamon roll. Wheat is cheap because its growth can be enhanced by nitrate fertilizer. Wheat is just a plant so it doesn't know that its nutritional value is diminished by being bleached, but that's okay, we can always add vitamins and minerals back to it. Wheat doesn't know that its growth causes the pollution of rivers and oceans. Wheat doesn't know how much marshland has been drained for its growth. But it's all good: our children and our children's children can figure out the solutions to these problems. That's why I'm eating this wonderful breakfast so I can be a happy physical opportunity for making lots and lots of children. Wheat tastes better when it's bleached. So does sugar.

Sugar is cool because without it the cinnamon roll and coffee would taste like shit. Sugar and coffee are cool because they wake me up in the morning so I can create high art like this. Coffee, sugar, and cinnamon are also cool because they're so cheap and provide so much pleasure like I'm experiencing right now. They're so cheap because they're produced with the help of slave wages in third world countries by skinny peasants named Pedro or Juan, or something who have no medical or dental care. Stupid peasants.

What? Yes, I'm finished with the cinnamon roll, you can throw the rest in the garbage. And can I have a refill? Two creams, please.

## Breakfast At Denny's

Breakfast cow slut on my plate. Bovine whore. I wanna hear you moo. **I said moo, bitch, moo!** Shave your processed, ill beef patty cunt in my face and make me eat you out between the cheeks of two powder milk biscuits as the bacon gravy cum wet spot dries on my chin in the ambience of Garth Brooks and GPC second hand nicotine. I'll wash down the fried scabs of your flesh with the milk you produced for your baby. And his little fat ass will be mine for lunch. Veal, Parmesan wild porn served up right on my plate with a side of dead snake embryos from a flightless fowl. Butter. Salt. Pepper. Coffee. Sugar. Cream. Cream in my face and down my throat your sweet teat=zz, you dumb four-legged slut. Stupid cow. I just fucked you for \$4.99 plus tax and tip. And you *still* don't satisfy me. Tomorrow I'll do myself a favor and buy a whore who **knows what she's doing!** I wonder if that skinny oatmeal bitch is still in town.

Order up! Order down. Order sideways. Forward and back. Future and past. How long will it last? Don't ask. Hide behind the mask of a smile while you wish you were somewhere else.



## Low pH Breakfast

Powdered cream incendiary  
Biscuit sausage arts.  
Cheese cheese cheese  
A cup of chemicals @ 36.3K  
401K business page rage  
Here you go, sir  
Drippy s'me patty me t  
bage salt pepper  
Laughter mourning radio  
even though it's not  
quite dead yet  
but a mos.  
Almost dead. Like what  
I'm eating  
and more synthetic  
No one plays games  
on these tables.

It's a little too real, and  
I'm awake now  
The drink, I think  
never lived at all  
And I can't help but  
wonder if I'm any different

Paul Keely found an  
unopened beer  
and sang to it  
A bird found a  
bagel crumb  
and sang to it  
I found myself and  
all I could do was laugh.

Acid does that

## Good Morning

Burnt black-brown bean buzz  
Electric crackle brain fuzz  
Mean caffeine Ear y or y bean  
Mocha alé cappuccino espresso  
More, more more more  
You pastry peddling coffeehouse whore!

I am the God of morning wake-up juice! Bow down and worship my holy ass wholeheartedly! You see, one drop of acid sweat from my pores has more caffeine than a pound of Folgers freeze-dried. The Pepsi-Cola Company offered me a fifty-thousand-a-year contract to piss into their vats of corn syrup so they'll never have to buy caffeine.

Coffee greets you exist only for me, and I for thee. I see clearly now. The veil from reality lifted. My mind once drifted, now focused. No more hocus pocus. All I need when I wake up. Take up the cup and drink. Thank I have another.

So, you big-boobed braless bage bitch, **Gimme the fucking coffee or DIE!!!**

< S urrrp > Ahhh thank you. And can I have two creams, please.

The lizard kings have been exiled to nonexistence, their reign of carnage and terror terminated for over  $65 \times 10^6$  years, ever since the majority of reptilian herbivores died from eating coffee trees. Then you had thrown that little pebble at the planet, thrusting more dramatic change upon evolved life forms than anything that's ever happened before on this little speck of a world. The mammals with their superior cerebra and adaptability to climate and anything else you can throw at them have overrun the landmasses. You've subjected them to everything from extreme heat and cold to draught and plague and still they live, always finding a means to survive. Resourceful little buggers.

The brightest of all the species have now developed language, emotions, tools, primitive logical thought, and even mastered fire. Via glaciations, you have separated them from their brothers in the southern jungles and fertile plains, just to see what will happen. Change will weed out the weak. Continuous change, while losses will inevitably occur, some of them incredibly large, seems to always eventually bring about progress.

But now the pinnacle of the mammal class has grown stagnant and set in its ways. When the humans act with cooperation there is not another animal that can defeat them. Now they have everything they need. Therefore advancements will not occur. Physical obstacles have been overcome. They have learned to store grains and dried fruits and vegetables for the winter—more than they will even need. Further physical hardships will produce little improvement at this point. What is needed is a social change.

With fire to keep the animals away, with plenty of greens, berries, roots, nuts, seeds and meat, with furs to keep them warm, with strong houses to keep out the weather, what more could the tribe need?

Gal'uk sits tending the fire in deep thought, while the hunting party is away. His son, Jarb, is with them on his first hunting trip. Gal'uk seethes, knowing that he will never be able to walk very far, never be able to hunt ever again, his leg will not permit it. For two summers he has been forced to remain in camp, growing soft, never again to hunt with the other men. The weather has been getting warmer over the past few years and still he must stay behind even though the plains are teeming with game. Not one day goes by when he doesn't wish he'd seen that big cat before it attacked.

The women tend the children or make traps and weapons and furs and clothing. Young girls and boys are out gathering nuts or digging roots. Old Szeezool chants in his hut, singing to the weather to make it happy. Gal'uk thinks the weather would probably be happier if Old Szeezool didn't sing to it. But then it's better to have the weather mildly peeved than to cross paths with grumpy Old Szeezool.

It is all that Gal'uk can do to make weapons and cook the meat and stews and soups. He's become good at it, but doesn't enjoy it. He hoists himself up onto his crutch and hobbles toward the outer edge of the village. One of the younger women beckons to him from her hut, but he has other items on the agenda. He carries his throwing spears and pike with him as he slowly, awkwardly, hobbles up to the practice mound. He throws his first spear, adjusting for the breeze, and it strikes perfectly into the pile of dead grass, leaves, pine needles and dirt. He never misses. And he keeps practicing. He counts six hands' worth of throws. Every day he does this, even though he knows he will never hunt again. Not one of the tribe ever laughs at him, they console him for his loss and offer any assistance they can, emotional or otherwise. And if it makes him happy to practice with his spears, then so be it.

The day passes uneventfully, which is a good thing because events happening usually mean some form of tragedy or another. Towards evening Gal'uk goes into the cave, which is,

for the most part, unoccupied during the warmer months. He carries his pike and a small torch with him. The paintings are becoming worn down again and Old Szeezool will have to apply a fresh layer soon.

Galluk breathes deeply, purposefully through his nose, feeling the energy flow throughout his body. He levels his gaze on the cat painting in front of him, lumping with its own eerie life in the torchlight, and stabs out at it over and over, a futile gesture, he knows, but somehow it makes him feel better to release his anger. Tiny chips fly from the wall and the flint tip of his pike as he strikes the painting over and over. Slowly he becomes tired and weary, deciding he should go back to his hut and woman.

The orange sunset glow on the trees and his woman smiling from the tribal stew pot, adding the meat of a hare she had caught, the sights, sounds, and smells, they are all comforting. His daughter, by his woman's side, is learning how to skin animals now, even though she only barely comes up to his navel, fast learner. He sits down for a small repast; the stew is mostly vegetables, roots, and herbs. The game has been scarce lately and he thinks he'd trade all his spears and furs for one little deer. It's been almost two weeks since he's had a decent portion of meat. He's filled with hunger and anger at not being able to do anything about it. Over the past few months he has become increasingly bitter and his tribe has been mildly upset at this, but what can they do? And he knows it, wishing he could be a little more cheerful, but how can he when his leg's mangled, making him near useless as a protector and hunter. He is ashamed. When a child is born into the tribe with a physical handicap that makes it unable to serve the tribe, it's quickly put to death. It's cruel, but not as cruel as a lifetime of hardship, and certainly not as cruel to the tribe as allowing the child to grow and possibly have more offspring like itself. But if a newborn baby's put to death, then why should he himself be spared?

The older children keeping watch at the edge of the hut village suddenly yell out, the hunting party is returning, empty handed. Galluk almost screams in rage. Almost. Except that he has no right, he can no longer hunt. The men trot into the village at a slow run, agitated, up in arms, even, terrified. Something bad has happened. Galluk, worried, makes certain that his son Jarb is among the hunters. And it seems they have all returned, which is a relief to the tribe.

They all attempt to tell their tale as one and nothing is coherent. The leader, Gonto, silences the hunters and the bewildered tribe with one mighty thunderous roar. Galluk used to lead the hunters when he was younger and uninjured. Those were the days. The story is quickly spit out and embellished, as most stories are.

A new tribe has settled in the plains by the river, a tribe of little dark-skinned men with giant black clouds around their heads. They have many white stripes painted on their bodies, or maybe they are white and painted black. Worst of all is the cacophony of sounds they make and scare away the game. Even the lions have grown restless.

All through the night Galluk's tribe drums and chants, led by Old Szeezool, who anoints the hunters with magic colors and animal fat to give each hunter the ferocity and speed that they will need for the upcoming battle. The women tremble, knowing some of their men may not return. And all Galluk is able to do is watch and seethe. But he cannot tolerate much more of this. He takes up his satchel of four throwing spears and his pike and limps away into the night with the aid of his crutch, thinking he may never return, but knowing deep in his heart that he must. Besides the tribe, what else is there?

The sounds of ritual chanting fade behind him as he limps into the dark forest as

quickly as his leg will allow. Soon the men will bed down for the night and moans of sex will saturate the village throughout the night. And that's the last thing he needs. He doesn't want to hear anything happy right now.

On and on he painfully and clumsily hobbles down the faintly moonlit path, keeping his ears pricked for the slightest rustle of leaves. But his trek remains uneventful, though he almost wishes for something to end the unbearable monotony that has become his life. His threshold of pain is almost reached: the joints grind and tendons pop gruesomely with every step.

An odor of moist earth tells him that he is near his destination—the small hot spring. The majority of the tribe shares it; no trusting is magic. It is the only spring of its type of which Galluk knows. In the winter the steam forms cloud pillars that almost reach the treetops and the warm liquid water attracts an mass of all sorts, and is therefore a dangerous place to be in the winter. Galluk and his tribe have fire, so they can melt ice for water. In the warmer months, like now, however, the hot spring is fairly safe. But nothing is very safe at night, except for the fiercest predators.

The barely audible trickle guides him to the exact spot. He bends over to soak his long hair, removing bits of dirt and crust, then sits in the small pool of running hot water trickling out from the craggy mountainside. He sits—very slowly—and then relaxes. There's some quality about it that eases the pain, and not just the physical pain. Relaxation is indeed a rare thing and he closes his eyes for just a moment, just a moment—not a wise thing to do, but if you can't occasionally let yourself go, Galluk thinks, then why, by the four winds, bother to keep going? Just a moment is all he needs. A moment is all it takes.

Hooves clack across boulders and leap down like no mountain goat ever could. A powerful hand slaps Galluk across the face and a crazy scream rends the air like some herd animal in the rut calling to his harem and staking his territory. A deep booming psychotic laugh rises in the air and flies around him in every direction. Galluk cannot help but panic, jumping out of the hot pool, dripping wet, grabbing his pike and listening closely for anything to stab out at. But all is silent. And extremely dark as the moon goes behind a cloud.

He begins to doubt his own senses. It seems that ages go by and the dawn is breaking. He has stood motionless for so long that even his hair has dried. Was he dreaming? If so, then why does his face hurt? Perhaps a large buck had run by and kicked up a branch and that was what had struck his face. But what was the crazy laugh? Deer, goats, or buffalo do not laugh. At least none that he has ever heard. He remains tense and coiled like a snake, ready to strike out at anything that moves.

But nothing presents itself to him. A strange tale, he thinks, one that his tribe will never believe. Why does this kind of *shur* always have to happen to *him*? He picks up his satchel of throwing spears and his crutch and starts to limp back to the village.

A red hot ember pops up and burns his ass—or it feels that way—except there is no fire. He spins around and sees the most astonishing creature he's ever laid eyes on silhouetted against the first light of day up on top of a rocky crag. It has the legs of an animal, the body, head, and arms of a large man, and most astoundingly of all, it has small horns on top of its head. Like a young buffalo.

Tense moments pass and Galluk wonders what it possibly could have been that struck his rump. He stands frozen and his antagonist doesn't bat an eyelash. Finally Galluk slowly relaxes and rubs his sore bottom. At that moment the bizarre animal charges with more speed than the fastest gazelle. Galluk barely has time to react, and by the time he raises his pike and

prepares to stab the beast, his pike is snapped in two as easily as a small twig. The bizarre animal just kicks its side and jumps over Gialuk's head, far into the air above the trees, and lands behind him with hardly a sound. It guffaws madly, dancing about in a furious spiral blur, kicking up a blinding cloud of dust and debris. Gialuk turns to run, but the thing knocks him to the ground as if Gialuk were not a grown man, but instead a little girl. He is humiliated and beaten and wonders how long this must continue before he is killed, thinking this must be how a rabbit feels when it is toyed with before the dogs finally decide to eat it.

The creature goes for his stomach and Gialuk knows it will soon be over, he will die with his intestines spilling out. The giant creature puts its large lips upon him and blows. Blows with its lips on Gialuk's abdomen. Gialuk tries to wrestle the creature off of himself, but it is hopeless and all he can do is laugh at this embarrassing tickle treatment. He imagines being tickled to death and the thought of that fate fills him with dread like no other ever could. The unimaginable is far more frightening than that which is familiar.

But soon the silly beast jumps up and pulls Gialuk with him. Gialuk wonders if he can get to his throwing spears and stab this thing before it gets its second wind. But his spears have disappeared. The animal, as if reading Gialuk's thoughts, points up into a tall pine. At the very top of the pine is Gialuk's satchel of spears. And he has had the last straw. He leaps straight for the creature's throat, but it ducks aside and pushes him down, and runs, waving its tail and shaking its hairy butt at Gialuk, insulting him with every step it takes. And Gialuk chases after the thing, leaping over small boulders and a streambed, fallen logs and deep ditch, through a small field and . . . And he stops, stops and cries. His leg, it's healed. How he has no idea, but there it is. The creature has vanished. But his leg is fine. Never better. He yells with more joy than he knew the whole world could contain. He yells his thanks to the weird creature, whatever it was, and runs back to the tribe.

On the way home he passes the hot spring again and there are his spears waiting for him, as well as his pike, completely whole again, as if nothing had ever happened to it. Also is his crutch. He picks it up and smashes it to bits against a boulder and then announces a clever twang with glee, doing a little jig while he pees. He can hardly wait to get back to the village and so starts off at a fast run. First he wants to see his wife, then maybe that one girl who's been pestering him lately. This is great! What could be better?

In answer to that question a large young buffalo comes into view. It turns and charges, but there are too many trees for it to navigate through. Gialuk leaps aside and spears the giant creature. It turns for a second run. Gialuk spears it yet again, easily ducking behind the trees. He wonders why the buffalo has strayed into the woods, usually buffalo stay in the fields, a good half day's run from here. But with his fourth and final spear, he kills the buffalo, stabs it right through the heart. There's no way he'll ever get it home, but hopefully he and his tribe can haul most of the meat back to the village.

The return trek is surprisingly short without his bad leg slowing him down. He runs into the village at a breakneck pace screaming and yelling for everyone to come look at his leg. They think he's finally lost it, they had all seen his leg before. It's severely mangled. But when everyone finally understands what he means, they come running out to see him hopping and jumping and running and doing back flips as if he were a boy.

Now that the tribe is fully awake, they have a battle to go start. But the fields are a good distance away and the hunters will need a good breakfast before they go to drive out or slaughter the upstart clan that has invaded their territory. Gialuk tells them of the buffalo he killed and the strange beast that somehow healed his leg. They are almost afraid of it and if

these had not been good things, they would be frightened. Still they are concerned.

The hunters go to fetch the buffalo, which will take a good while, and the battle might have to be postponed, yet there it lies, set right at the edge of the village. Galluk's mouth drops open, the buffalo was far away. Did he not really kill it? Had it followed him all this way seeking revenge? Why hadn't he heard the buffalo walking behind him? A strange birdlike sound comes from all around in the woods. But it's like no bird the tribe has ever heard before, it sometimes is very low-pitched and then suddenly very shrill. It is beautiful, but frighteningly mysterious. Then it suddenly stops. And Galluk knows how the buffalo had got to be here: it was carried by his strange friend. He supposes it's a friend, it did bring the tribe meat.

Suddenly Galluk is filled with a strange sense, one that he has never experienced before. The odd creature is telling him to hurry and cook the meat, and go off to battle. The new tribe is evil and must be driven away or killed at all costs. Galluk silently says that he will do his best.

Old Szeezoo comes dancing up to the buffalo, sniffing at it, inspecting it. Then he spends a good while feeling Galluk's once-injured leg. He waves his medicine-stick at it, he sings to it, he asks it questions and pretends to hear answers. And he sits down for several minutes shaking his head from side to side and humming. His eyes snap open and he proudly proclaims that he had foreseen these events. When asked why he didn't tell anyone, he simply said that it was not for them to know the will of the spirits, he was chosen to guide the tribe in these matters, not them.

Small pieces of the buffalo are quickly roasted over the fire with little preparation and tasting that way, but the meal of fruit, greens, nuts, and fresh-roasted meat isn't bad and will more than suffice to nourish the hunters on their long journey and into battle. Galluk's woman starts an argument, as women will do, saying that since Galluk is now healed, it is he who should lead the hunters. Pros and cons fly back and forth and Galluk and Gooto just sit there, not wanting to divide the tribe at such a crucial moment. And the two are old friends. Old Szeezoo demands a short wrestling match to determine who the leader will be, but the two hunters stand and clasp hands and tell the old man to mind his own business. There will be no wrestling today. The two will lead the men into battle together. Galluk is older and more experienced, but Gooto knows the land better and is more recently in practice than Galluk.

Old Szeezoo is disappointed at not being able to see a good wrestling match, but he honors their decision and sends them into battle with his blessings and the blessings of the spirits, especially this new spirit that has come into their presence. The old man will have to think of a name for it.

The joy of hunting or going into battle is something that Galluk had thought he'd lost forever. He thinks maybe he's dreaming and he'll wake up again in the hot spring, probably with another large mountain cat standing over him ready to mangle his other leg, with his luck. The other hunters laugh at him and tease him, saying it must be nice to have your very own spirit friend. He tells them, "You're right, it is!" (Translated.)

On the path toward battle is a herd of goats drinking at a pond. Goat meat isn't the tastiest, but Galluk has to have a shot at one. Much time is spent sneaking up on the herd. It is a long way off and he will have to aim carefully. He nocks his best throwing spear into the atlatl (spear-throwing device) and launches it into the herd. It strikes perfectly! Or so everyone thinks. He was actually aiming at the goat next to that one. Oh well. Who's to

know? They tie up the goat and run a long spear between its legs to carry it with them.

When the hunters near the plains they stop at their chatter. No orders need to be given; everyone knows to keep quiet. The new tribe is cooking a small antelope over an open fire. It seems the best plan of attack would be to sneak in as close as possible and then throw their spears into their enemy. But somehow... No, Galuk says something, so right the hunters must wait. Gooto agrees to listen to Galluk's instincts. Lately he has had more luck than a person has a right to have. Lo and behold the strange bird sound returns. And the creature also. The hunters all stare in amazement as it blows into a small hollow rod like a short blowgun and whistling sounds pour out of it. The odd man-beast prances toward the new tribe, mesmerizing every single one of them.

While the funny-looking (and smiling) dark men have their attention focused on the dancing man-beast, Galuk, Gooto, Jarb, and all four hands-and-one of the hunters, to be exact, simply walk up behind the new tribe and say them a I men, women, and children. The hunters feel as if they are being guided by an unseen protecting hand. After some debate, it is decided that the babies and very young children of the new tribe are to be kept alive to be raised as workers. If not for the man-beast, many of the hunters would have died in this battle. A debt of gratitude is owed to Galluk's new spirit friend, although it doesn't seem to want gratitude. It has run away yet again and Galuk decides to go chasing after it, following the strange footprints.

The sun has almost sunk below the horizon when Calluk finally catches up to his new friend. He asks it what it wants of him and why has it been helping him. The creature says nothing but smiles and puts the hollow pipe to his mouth and makes that beautiful sounding noise again. Calluk can do nothing but listen. And at last the man-beast puts aside his music-maker and communicates with Galluk, though not through language. Somehow the creature is amazingly inside of Galluk's head... or is it the other way around? It presents him with the hollow piece of wood and says, { Learn to play this, and I will always be close by. } It runs over the horizon almost faster than Galluk's eyes can follow. It has another of those funny music-makers besides the one it had given Galluk. The high-pitched music echoes a I around and all the animals and birds in the field leap and play when they hear it. Calluk hears the hunters celebrating their victory just over the horizon and thinks he had best join them. But before that he puts the hollow pipe to his mouth and blows. Nothing happens. Well, he can figure it out later.

Back at the battle site the hunters lay out the jewelry, clothes, and tools... spoils of war. And they gorge themselves on the strange foods the new tribe had brought with them into this region. There are sweet balls of nuts and seeds stuck together with some sort of sugary sap that is even sweeter than fruit. Galluk tries one of them and it makes him want to leap out of his skin and go running across the horizon. Instead he and his war party celebrate their victory by dancing all the way back to the village, carrying their spoils of war and trying to ignore the wailing and tears of the dark-skinned children. A strange feeling, like many he's been having lately, tells him that the seeds in these funny sweet balls make him feel this good. He must have more of these seeds that make people feel this way. But that will be a later project. All Galuk can think of for the moment is getting back to his woman and maybe he'll take on that young girl as well. It is not a forbidden practice in his tribe. And why should he not? He has brought the aid of the spirits to the tribe. And with the spirits on their side, what more could the tribe need?



### Fire!

Flames licking, tongues of heat smoke rising  
to heaven with the scent of human  
flesh roasting on the open fire  
The evening smelt fills the room.  
"Oh ho but wait," chuckled Pooh, "the smelt is like a honey pot—  
it's not evil."  
"Chris tastes good!" exclaimed Rabbit, getting grease on his fur.  
"His tarts are so juicy."  
"Could use barbecue sauce," squeaked Piglet.  
The family jewels taste good in their natural tartar sauce."  
said Eeyore, happy for once on his night off from  
performing in Tijuana bars.  
"Save one of those jewels for me!" insisted Tigger barely controlling  
his crystal-meth-induced bouncing while earning no  
one of Christopher Robin's tender roasted arms  
and sharing a piece with Roo.  
And they all went to bed with full happy tummies  
and dreams of sugar-jewels dancing in their heads.

### Leper's Poem

Today my penis fell off and onto my shoe  
So I picked it back up and reattached it with glue  
But then, as I did, my hand fell off too  
Now when I get an erection I wave, "You-hoo"  
What will you do if I wave at you?  
Will you laugh, scream, or run away?  
Maybe you'll like it maybe you'll stay  
Perhaps you want to be amputee fisted!  
Shit I'm twisted, a fucked bastard  
Evade Dave is evade Dave backward

The Little Goddess crouches and scoots close to the ground, concealing herself in a patch of tall lush grass, waiting for the perfect moment to leap out and surprise potential prey. Her powerful back legs are ready to spring and her claws are extended in anticipation. A bird lands on the muddy bank. The river is lazy and low this time of year and birds often pick insects and small lizards from the mud. The Little Goddess leaps out when the bird has its back turned. The kill is successful. And such a large bird too!

Princess Bithia ceps with glee when she sees her cat dragging the bird toward her. It's the fourth one this week, in addition to one small lizard.

But this day the princess is after a prey of her own, a different kind of prey, one that she can keep. She rehearses the skit in her mind, knowing exactly what she'll do while waiting for her cue to come floating down the river. And there it is.

Her scream rends the afternoon peace, just as her cat does to the bird's throat. Her useless handmaidens panic and her guards that were standing vigilant on a nearby hill come racing to her side, their chariots and armor of the royal guard gleaming and flashing under the bright sun, their horses kicking up sand and dust and pounding the ground.

Princess Bithia orders one of her handmaidens into the river to fetch the floating prize. And if you tip that basket over, I'll see your head floating down the river.

The servant girl bows respectfully and out of fear and borrows the guard's spear to hook the basket and draw it towards her, on a wading out thigh high, ever fearful of crocs in the Nile. She pulls the tatted, watertight basket ashore and several disgusting leeches from her legs.

The Little Goddess is tearing into the bird's intestines, obvious to all the commotion in a feast of gory ecstasy. Bithia holds the baby up into the air and announces, Behold! This child is a gift from Isis. The guards say nothing, knowing their station, but think something along the lines of, Oh shit, here she goes again with some crazy new stunt to piss off her father.

Her handmaidens, on the other hand, are slightly more privileged than the servile soldiers and therefore slightly more argumentative. This is an Israelite child. You must throw it into the water to drown as your father has decreed!

The baby wails uncontrollably when it hears the loud bickering, making the princess backhand her servant, as she frequently does, though usually not with such force. She is shocked by her own aggressiveness. Perhaps the crying infant awakened some protective instinct lying dormant within her, and she thrills at this realization. Her servants bow down fearfully before her on their hands and knees.

Do you deny this divine sign? Do you deny that the goddess Isis speaks to me and through me? If you deny me, then you also deny my father, the Pharaoh. Bithia reprimands. Be thankful that I do not drown you in the river! Her dark eyes flash and her bosom heaves, her perky nipples barely visible through her filmy tunic. She wears such clothes just to tease her poor guards.

She contemplates kicking one of her servants in the face, perhaps the moathy one, or perhaps the quiet one, so that that one will be angry towards the moathy one. However, she decides she best stick to the original plot rather than improvise.

You there, Israelite girl! Come here. Bithia calls to an Israelite woman gathering reeds some ways down river.

Miriam, the poor Israelite girl, is scared witless. Or seems that way. She drops her chores and comes running to the princess, call. She trembles and kneels with her face to the ground before the princess.

Girl, would you know a woman who can nurse this holy child, an Israelite woman that has recently had her own brat thrown into the river? Princess Bithia asks.

The young woman merely nods, trembling slightly as Bithia knew she would – they practiced this scene about ten times so as to deceive any servants or common folk that might be watching. In truth Princess Bithia had hoped for a larger audience.

Then you will bring this woman to me immediately! **Guards!** One of you take this girl and return with the woman who will nurse my child.

The guards are relieved that they aren't being ordered to slaughter the Israelite girl, as they had half-suspected the princess would order them to. They silently give thanks to half a dozen pagan gods that they won't have to clean off their swords or risk spattering their uniforms with the blood of some slave tramp. The chariot driver helps the girl aboard, slaps the horse with the long reins, and they pull out at a trot. Miriam frightened out of her wits and clinging to the chariot for dear life – she's never been in a chariot before and hopes never to have to again. Her fear gives the driver a bit of cheap entertainment and with a cruel grin he slaps the horses again.

Time passes and the baby continues to wail hungrily, wanting to nurse. Princess Bithia holds it to her bare breasts and allows it to suckle to attempt lulling the tiny babe. It only succeeds temporarily. She yearns for the day when she might have a child like this, rather than merely adopt one. Maybe some day Isis will eventually bless her with a little one of her own.

The guard returns with the Israelite girl and her mother. They dismount from the chariot and bow down before the princess yet again, the guard thinking that perhaps being a taskmaster over the Israelite construction slaves would be less bad for the back. And less hazardous too.

Woman, are you able to nurse this child of mine, this gift from Isis? Bithia asks.

Yes, my princess, I can and will, the woman agrees, still bowing.

Then tell me your name so that I may come for my child when it is weaned.

I am Yocheved, of the tribe of Levi, wife of Amram, also a Levite, the Israelite slave woman answers.

Then take this child and care for it well, or you will have the wrath of the Pharaoh brought down on your household! Bithia threatens, enjoying this little acting game.

Of course I will obey, oh princess. What shall we call your child? Yocheved's reluctance to say the words "your child" escapes the notice of the handmaidens and the guards.

Since you will nurse my child, I will give him a name from the Israelite's language. His name shall be Moshèh – he who was drawn from the water.

The two Israelite women walk away bowing. The baby quiets down instantly when it finds the familiar nipple of its mother, who now is silently shedding her own river of tears, tears of joy and also tears of grief. Her conscience is stained with this impure action of conspiring with the Israelites, mortal enemies of her people, but she gives thanks to the gods of her people that her child will live. All because her father, Levi, had struck a deal with the Pharaoh, promising to use his political influence to calm the Israelites so that they will not riot on the condition that his grandson will be spared from slaughter.

The Little Goddess finishes her meal, leaving only the feet, spine, head, and wings of her prey. Princess Bithia lifts her purring cat and puts it on its cushion in a carrying box until she gets back to the palace. She smiles knowing that now she has a child.

The chariot pulls away at a slow pace so as not to upset The Little Goddess.

Enough games! Is this any way for an omnipotent and omniscient being to behave? Not that it matters – there is no I for you to answer to. Except yourself. Even now, only a few 10<sup>9</sup> years since the last physical manifestation of the gods which you created, then destroyed, the skeptics and naysayers flourish, so quick to forget their glorious past and history, all that you had taught and given them. All the same – they must find their own power within themselves. With a little assistance the barriers will be overcome. In another few 10<sup>9</sup> years or so the transcendence will begin, each and

every person is a chrysalis of untapped unimaginable power. Unimagined, that is, by all but you.

When they become as you the quest can begin. You will find the origin of *all* creation, not merely of this universe, but *all* universes. Such a long way to go before the humans are ready to join you, to be recruited. Better get started. But where and how? Hmm, let's see.

He doesn't need this, he thinks. This he *does not need*. Why him? **Him!** Of all people. It's bad enough that his childhood was in constant turmoil. His adopted mother, while never abusive, was the world's worst caregiver, raised him without any discipline whatsoever. And the priests gave him more education than a sane person needs. Then, when he was a foolish idyllic young man, the Pharaoh sent him into exile for killing that psychotic slave driver. Basiard had it coming though. Moshéh damn near starved in the desert, and would have if not for the girl he met by the well, the girl who became his wife, Tzipporah. Oh, she was frightened of him at first, as well she should have been: he looked like a wild man, having spent countless months in the harsh wilderness. But she helped him and gave him water and even a loaf of bread. Kindness such as that is unheard of, thinks Moshéh. And the frog that he was became a prince in her eyes. Little did Tzipporah know that he used to be an actual prince. He didn't tell her because he didn't want her to know he was an outcast.

This international trip that Yhwh is sending him on will surely tear him away from his wife. Why, why, why? He doesn't want to leave her or his son and certainly not his father-in-law, who over the years has shown him more kindness than his own real father, the priests, or the Pharaoh, all put together. His father-in-law, Jethro, taught him a real trade: no magic, no mumbo-jumbo—he taught him to herd sheep. Who'd have thought? Sheep. But he must admit: the life of a shepherd is truly blessed, in its way.

Life is good: he enjoys his work, good for the body, relaxing to the mind. He has more freedom than he ever had at the palace—even with all the girls, power, and wealth. He cringes to remember what a spoiled rotten little dog turd he was. Life's funny sometimes.

**But this?"** Talking burning bushes that claim to be the voice of the one true God? A voice that pierced him to his innermost core. He must be losing his mind! There's no other explanation. He tried talking to his wife about it, but couldn't really bring himself to admit his insanity. But his insanity and the voices he's hearing won't leave him alone: he *must* go on this trip. He explained to Jethro that he was going on a mission from Yhwh, and the older man seemed to understand. Why, Moshéh could only wonder. If he had a daughter and her husband was leaving on a holy mission, he'd throttle the jerk's neck. Jethro was being a bit too understanding, which was uncharacteristic of him. Perhaps this really is a mission from Yhwh. Or perhaps he's gone madder than a snake in a parade, he thinks.

Have you chosen well, this man who questions too much, who questions his own mind, this superstitious, bred who believes in everything ridiculous yet now doubts his own senses? Can he overcome his fear and doubt to conquer the world with the beauty of pure truth? Does he have the mental capacity to look at your face and survive? Will he comprehend what he sees? Is this race of mortals prepared for raw, naked truth? Whorls of space-time electrical charges, magnetic poles, super-dense particles dancing around the seeming vacuum with perfect precision in a field of uncertainty unknown to all but you, the perfect mind, subtle reflection of all existence, a figment of the universe's mind and its mind simultaneously. Out of the chaos from which you were born, out of infinite improbability as if it were nothing more than a young, fertile vagina and you have to laugh. Even for you it's difficult to comprehend your existence. So how will Moshéh tell his people of your greatness when you barely understand it yourself?

Perhaps this was a mistake. Perhaps erasure of this mistake would best benefit your cause, your quest to turn this race into something more than thinking animals.

The man hobbles into town with a blank staring expression, assisted by his young pretty wife, Tzipporah. If she were of a different culture she would leave him alone with his unattainable dreams, which only you know are the truth. The people look at him thinking "Oh, great, an outcast from another land whose lost his mind (even if he is well-dressed). Well, the Egyptians will soon run his diseased ass out of town."

Yet slowly, the haze disappears from his eyes and mind, but not the afterglow from seeing you in all your infinite glory. He walks down the streets of his youth, still holding his wife tightly but now out of affection rather than for support. Ever so slowly his confusion disappears and a smile crosses his lips. A good thing for Tzipporah had started worrying even before they got to town—their food is gone, they had brought little jewelry (due to fear of bandits), and it's unlikely that Mosheh can find gainful employment in a city filled with slaves. But he always has a way of pulling through. That is so long as he hasn't lost his mind, what little of there is. Tzipporah knows he isn't the brightest star in the sky, but he's always been a good man.

Mosheh wonders what to do first: go see his family, visit the palace, or try to find food? The palace could be a dangerous place to visit, even though it's been closed about sixty years. Mosheh guesses, incorrectly as always. Still, the Pharaoh was always one to catch his grudges almost as greedily as if they're gold. Perhaps it's best to see his family and friends first.

Aaron can't believe his eyes. He blinks twice to be certain it's not a dream. And there, sitting at the table with his mom and sister, is his older brother, Mosheh. Mosheh the Troublemaker. Aaron had always called him joking of course. The two clasp hands and hug, each suppressing a tear of joy. "How long has it been? seven... eight years?" Aaron asks.

"More like a hundred!" Mosheh replies, laughing. And he stops suddenly. "I'm sorry to hear about father. I am happy to be back, sad to hear that father is gone."

"I kept wondering if you would ever return." Aaron sits down at the table with the family, greeting Tzipporah and tickling Moses' new son. "What brings you back? Come to steal the crown off the new pharaoh's head?"

With all seriousness, rare for the two brothers, Mosheh looks at Aaron with eyes filled with pure fear and terror, and awe and respect. He speaks in a distant voice, his eyes fixed on a distant thought. "I have seen the face of the one true God. He has sent me here on a mission to free our people for a higher purpose. And he looks at his brother with a pleading expression. "Help me, brother. Help me, please. Or He... He... kill me. I can't do this all alone." Tears fall from his eyes in streams that run down his tanned cheeks and soak into his long brown beard.

Aaron takes Mosheh's hand and holds him close. "My brother, Mosheh, haven't I told you countless times before, with your dreams and my brains, there is nothing we cannot do, no adventure too grand, no plan that is impossible. I can only wonder at what marvelous thing has finally prompted you to realize this!"

They look back across the desert behind them, mud still clinging to their clothes. The tens of thousands of Israelites have just crossed through the dry part of the marshes to escape the fast-approaching pharaoh's soldiers. They are all filthy and exhausted beyond words. So far they had been lucky, but it seems as if their luck will soon be over.

Egyptian soldiers are closing in. Their armor clangs muscally to sing a warning song from a mile away. They have crossed the marshes to bring the Israelites back to Egypt. The marshes have tremendously slowed them down; they have left their chariots behind. But the soldiers have only been crossing the marshes for a day; the Israelites have hardly slept in a week. They will be severely beaten for this outrage. Many of them will die.

The people Mosheh and Aaron have led away from Egypt—even their own families—turn a vengeful eye towards them and accuse them of being deceivers. The Israelites are prepared to hand

over the two rebel leaders to the Egyptians, hoping to avoid the retribution for which the Egyptians are so well known. The crowd gathers around Mosheh and Aaron, preparing to seize and offer them to the soldiers now crossing the Reed Sea. The soldiers are chanting some war song, singing of how many Israelites they will kill, thirsty swords and spears. Vagabond blasphemous curses reach across the desert sands. The soldiers are so numerous that their roars combine to sound like thunder. Women weep and tremble, clutching their children, knowing the cruel Egyptians all too well. After the men are killed, many of the children will soon follow, and the girls and women raped.

The false prophets and their phony god have led them to into the trap, jaws of death, despite their loyalty, despite the sacrifices they offered on the altar in the wilderness. This god, like all others, appears to only serve himself.

So soon do the people forget, so short their memories. Had you not told Mosheh of the 10 plagues that would wear down the Pharaoh? Had you not delivered vengeance into the hands of a people who had been turned into little more than pack animals? Did they not witness the 1<sup>st</sup> born children of the Egyptians dead on the day before their exodus from the land of their bitter slavery? And now they doubt you? They question your glory? Such outrage! Such arrogance! You have indeed chosen well. They truly are worthy of your wisdom.

The gaping jaws of death open wide before them, the women weep and tremble, children wail. Even the men, mostly weaponless and untrained, fret for their lives. The jaws of death open wide, a sense of impending doom hovers over the land. Even the animals feel it coming.

The laughter of death can almost be heard, a low roar over the horizon. Swamp birds fly away, leaving behind their young, knowing there is no hope for them. Death's laughter can be felt underfoot. The ground shakes with the anger of a hundred thousand angry gods. The Egyptian gods have come along with their soldiers to bring death upon us. That is what the sound is. It must be. The people cry out.

Mosheh, the fool prophet, raises his shepherd's staff into the air and cries out to his god. The man has faith, if no brains. Many people run and scatter across the desert, hoping to escape whatever doom is headed their way. Others bow down on their hands and knees, begging the gods for forgiveness. And Mosheh, Aaron, and their sister Miriam must stand and stare from atop a hill toward the Sea of Reeds where the Egyptians are trudging through the mire, and have almost reached the shore. Mosheh is lost in some unfathomable trance, chanting indecipherable words to himself or to his god. And the ground shakes violently.

The people have never known anything like this. It grows louder and fiercer with every passing heartbeat. From their vantage point above the marshes, they can see the thousands of soldiers as tiny little dots, marching single file. While stretching across the horizon over the sea appears a white line like a low cloud formation, that appears to be growing. The ground trembles again, more violently, knocking everyone to the ground, everyone except the old fool Mosheh, who never did know when to quit. The line becomes a blue-white blur. And then it is obvious, though unthinkable. A virtual wall of water is coming to destroy them all.

Unbearable seconds seem like eternities, though only total to just under a minute. The water reaches the shore and almost utterly obliterates the Egyptian army, except for a few who had scrambled to make it to high ground. A few of the Israelites are also killed by the giant wave, but only a very few.

The shock of victory is almost as unbearable as the losses they thought that they would have to suffer through. Egyptian soldiers stand, dazed and confused, sorely outnumbered, they drop their weapons and surrender, begging for a merciful death from their captors, the Israelites.

Revenge is a dish best served cold, on icy waters. The soldiers, only used to tormenting easily defeated foes, now know what it is like to be beaten and spit upon, their backs lashed into a

pulp of raw meat. All the while Mosheh stands on the hill, his staff raised high, but no one pays attention to him until

**Stop!** His voice echoes like thunder. And those standing near to Mosheh could swear that there is lightning flashing in his eyes. Stop this madness. There will be no more death this day. You soldiers. Return to Egypt and tell the Pharaoh that his army has been destroyed by the one true God. Tell the world that you have witnessed the power of our God. The God of the Israelites. The God over all creation. **Now go! Get out of my sight!**

And that thinks Mosheh, incorrectly as usual, is the end of the Israelites' torment.

Now that you have your followers, there needs to be a test, some sort of rules. Simple rules, of course, for very simpleminded creatures. Something that will be familiar to them, yet smack of a higher purpose, in the grand scheme of the universe, something to guarantee their part in the passion play. A few simple and easy rules. Well, maybe not too simple.

I am the Lord your God, eternal and divine. Whom you experience within yourself. I led you out of the land of Egypt where you could not worship Me within yourself.

(1) From now on you shall not put other gods above Me. You shall not acknowledge gods as being higher than Me which is within you, be they from the skies above or from the earth below or from anywhere in between. You shall not worship anything that is below. The Divine in yourself, for I am The Eternal in you that works into your body and hence affects the coming generations. If you do not recognize Me in you, I will not exist as Divine Nature within your children, grandchildren and great grandchildren, and their bodies will become waste. If you recognize Me in you, I shall live on as you to the thousandth generation, and the bodies of your people will prosper. (Well, maybe that's not so simple, but if they can't recognize that they are part of something more than just flesh and blood or make believe ghosts and demons, if they think that Gods' ware up in the sky or elsewhere and not within themselves, then they will never be able to transcend the material plane. And if they can't do that, then their offspring will eventually die. You'll see to that. Anyway.)

(2) You shall not create any graven images to worship. (If they don't realize that the divine can never be found in stone or wood or gold or any object, indeed, not even in ideas that exist outside of their own minds, that divinity must be found within themselves, if they don't realize this, then they will never be more than thinking monkeys.)

(3) You shall not speak in error of Me in you. (For everything false about the I within you will corrupt your body.) (If they habitually think and say poisonous ideas about God within themselves, they will kill the divine within themselves, and they will never reach the goal.)

(4) You shall distinguish your days of work from the Sabbath, in order that your existence may become an image of My existence. For what lives in you as the I within you, created the world in six days and lived with Himself on the seventh day. Thus shall be your doing and your son's doing and your daughter's doing and your servants' doing and your beasts' doing and the doing of whatever else is with you. Be turned for only six days toward the outer, on the seventh day, however, shall your gaze seek Me in you. (If they don't spend at least 1 out of 7 days contemplating the higher things within themselves, higher than more food and easier life, they will never transcend the material plane.) Alright, now for something a bit more down-to-earth, some rules to minimize bickering between each other.)

(5) Continue to work in the ways of your elders so that the possessions they have earned by the power I have developed in them will remain with you, as your property. (That way the knowledge they accumulate won't be wasted, so no I will have to reinvent the wheel.)

(6) Do not murder.

(7) Do not commit adultery.



(8) 'Do not steal.

(9) 'Do not disparage the worth of your fellowman by speaking falsely of him.'

(10) 'Do not look begrudgingly upon the house of your fellowman.'

Well, that's not too bad. If that doesn't guide them in the right direction, then nothing will. And just so to prevent the rules from wearing down over the years, you carve them out of the hardest material in the universe—diamond. Those simple rules shouldn't be too difficult to follow.

The old man stands on the hill, his followers and guards surround him, hundreds of thousands of people he guesses. He has sacrificed a bull and spattered the altar with blood. Clay vessels of blood have been placed on either side of the holy altar. Mosheh's assistants lift the stone tablets from the ark for him to read one last time. He holds the bronze serpent in the air to ward off evil and death. His long gray beard flaps in the wind like a flag.

He moans and chants some incomprehensible language. A thousand rules he has devised and dictated, handed down from the mouth of Yhwh. Everywhere he looks he sees The Lord Yhwh (what he imagines to be the name of that which cannot be named—your name). Everywhere he sees your might: in the food he scavenges from the desert, in the clouds in the sky, in the sunset and sunrise—everywhere he sees you, everywhere but within himself. Because he has never truly looked. We I, you tried.

And these people he leads, so intelligent, so full of life. Yet Mosheh's own mind is fragmented beyond all hope, like a primitive shaman who's eaten too many psychedelic substances. Everywhere he looks he finds fault with the world and those around him, yet he never looks inward.

The soldiers stand ready for battle. Phinehas, the lead general, stands at the altar. Joshua, having grown too old to lead the Israelites into battle. They are now to drive out, their age-old enemy, the Midianites, to take their land and livestock, to take their houses, to take their wives for their own. All because Mosheh has said that it is your will—the Will of God—that they go to conquer and live in The Promised Land.

The Midianites stand ready, awaiting death. They will die, but they will not die quietly. Mosheh, Eleazar, and all the high priests give some sort of bizarre holy signal to let the battle begin. Thousands of Israelites rush forward with weapons and armor to slay the Midianites who had tempted the Israelites with sins of the flesh and brought upon them a plague (venereal disease). And so these evil idolaters and temptresses had steered the Israelites from their god, Yhwh. Yes, it was all the fault of the sinning Midianites that so many of the Israelites strayed from you, their one true God (Who they never really understood anyway). Ah, yes, of course, it was all their fault that so many Israelites died of VD. So now they too must die.

The Israelite army is filled with the power of prayer, having spent the entire previous day, the Sabbath, focusing on the beauty, power, and glory of Yhwh. They will be victorious in His name! They listen to Mosheh telling them to go and achieve a great victory in the name of All That Is Holy. Yhwh will see you into the Promised Land now held by these sinners, idolaters, and harlots. Now go claim the land that rightfully belongs to us.

And Mosheh retires to his tent, feeling ill.

With a loud roar the well-trained Israelite men charge across the plains toward the pitifully small Midianite army. The Israelites swarm over their enemies and annihilate them in a single blow, killing every last man old enough to carry a weapon, leaving a massive feast for the vultures, claiming the spoils of victory. For all their short lives they have been a giant nomadic tribe wandering through the desert, now they would soon have a home! And the livestock and women of their enemies! Such a fertile land it is too. With fruit trees everywhere by the Jordan River, tall grass for the cattle and sheep, it is truly paradise! The generals return from battle to bring Mosheh the news of victory. They bow as they enter his tent.

"Come over here Phinehas. An aged Mosheh pants to his general. "How went the battle?" Tell me they are at last finally destroyed.

"Yes, but of course they are sir. we outnumbered them five to one. And you should see all that we have captured! Their gold and jewelry is more stunning than that of the Egyptians. There must be a few thousand cattle and even more sheep. And the girls, boys, and women. We will soon have a mighty nation.

"What?" The Women and boys? You have kept them alive? They will. They will kill us in our sleep. And the diseased women you must kill all of them. Only the young virgin girls are you to keep alive. Now you must leave me.

And Mosheh never saw the Promised Land. Of course the Promised Land you spoke of was the holiness within, not some piece of fancy real estate. All his sins, all the sins of his followers, the way they dwell on the exterior physical world rather than seeking divinity within themselves, all that could be forgiven, they are only animals. They are an extremely intelligent race, given that they have barely reached the highest step of the earth's evolutionary ladder. And Mosheh was very creative with his tales of creation. It is not his fault that he never really understood all that you said. It is amazing he understood the small amount that he did. So why this awful punishment? Why on earth would you kill him now, just before he reaches The Promised Land? Because the stupid idiot can't even add 1 + 1 and arrive at 2!

Is merely killing him good enough? Simply allowing him to rot into nothingness? No! It is not! Even you are surprised by your viciousness, you raise his body up into the sky when no 1 is looking, remaining in a state of perpetual life and keen perception, so that he can watch the history of the world unfold!

Time to try again. Time to whip these worthless scraps of animated mud into shape. You just need to be a little more selective. No more stupid mistakes. Moshe was too bloodthirsty and not intelligent enough to understand the simplest principles. Surely there must be another, some, worthy of understanding, some 1 who can adequately teach his knowledge to people the world over. Some 1 educated, a rich man, a man who would see ownership of all material possession as a fleeting temporary state. Only a rich man surrounded with luxury could even conceive of thinking along those lines.

Let's see who shall it be?

The girls in their finest silk robes chase the young prince round the summer palace with fresh fruits and sweet cakes to offer him. A fun game, thinks the prince, thirteen years old now. He must have done something right in his former lives. Or so he's always been told. The girls strum sitars and play flutes or drums, quite skilled, having studied music and the arts of pleasure all of their short lives. With mystical rhythms they undulate their hips and bodies in perfect little circles, dripping sweat and smelling sweeter than flowers. Every move they make carries his mind to deeper realms of paradise to dance with the gods. And they are as practiced in the arts of love as they are with their musical instruments.

Their young breasts bounce from side to side and up and down and all around, jiggling to please the eye for all eternity. They rotate their firm little buttocks in sensuous patterns that surely the gods themselves must have designed. The only proof that gods are good. Assuming that they did breathe life into humans and all living things.

At five of the girls ever so slowly remove their clothing, one at a time, singing of love and happiness, touching themselves to please the eye. They slide over to the prince like sly little snakes, only heartedly playing their instruments now, they sit beside him on his divan and recline sumptuously on the pillows, and begin massaging him in ways that send his soul

soaring though the clouds. They kneed his skin and muscular flesh. They gently pull away his robe and underclothes from his sinuous, well-toned body. They caress his dark skin, kiss his full lips, and lick his tongue ever so slowly. The youngest girl carefully squeezes his manhood between her soft fingers then gently wraps her lips tightly around it. No matter how she tries, only half of it will fit into her mouth. And she knows it's time for her to lose her maidenhead, but she's not afraid; she has trained and she is ready.

She squashes above him while he sucks on another girl's breast and uses his fingers to bring another girl to screaming pleasure. The young virgin slowly takes the prince's large penis inside her and she moans and whimpers with pain and delight. Her juices flow like a river onto the prince's belly, a pink mixture of blood, semen, and ecstasy until she can stand no more.

The prince gently lifts her exhausted frame off of himself and soothingly licks her sore little vagina while mounting another girl as yet another girl stops playing her musical instrument for a few moments to offer the prince and his lovers a sip of refreshing mango nectar.

He releases the sticky young just-devirginized girl and picks up the tempo with the older, more experienced woman, faster, faster, faster.

"Excuse me, Prince Siddhartha," Viswamitra rudely interrupts, "it is past time for your lessons. But of course I will wait in the library until you are finished."

Prince Gautama Siddhartha and his Cousin, Devadatta, sit in the luxurious library studying their numbers lessons that their teacher, Viswamitra, had given them.

"But look," the prince tries to explain to his cousin, "one of any one thing is only one of that thing."

"Yes, I see that. Any fool can plainly see that!" Devadatta impatiently complains.

"Please be patient, my cousin. And two twos are four. And one-and-a-half of one-and-a-half is two-and-a-fourth."

"Yes, oh great prince, we have already established this."

"So the question I'm asking is this: What number multiplied by itself is the equivalent to two? Or three? Or five? These numbers must exist, but what are they?" the prince tried to reason with his stubborn cousin.

"Okay, but *why* must they exist, cousin, is my question to you. What is so special about them that they simply must be? If I have two bowls of rice and I need to double it, I need two more bowls of rice. What more is there to know, oh noble prince?" The cantankerous younger cousin debates the prince with sarcastic glee.

While the two debate the existence of simple irrational numbers, unbeknownst to them King Suddhodana (the prince's father) and Viswamitra watch the two pupils and listen to all that they have to say. And the manner in which they say it.

"His behavior is as noble as his birth, my king," the old teacher whispers to his friend. "And he has learned all that I have to teach him. And at such a young age."

"What is this of which they speak, Viswamitra? I have never heard of it."

"Perhaps you avoided such teachings in your youth. It is merely an old mathematical dilemma. Think no more of it."

"Yes, old friend, it is more than my aged brain cares to contemplate. But we must concoct something, some device with which we can hold my son's curiosity. I almost wish that he were more like his cousin, eager to rule and happy with mere earthly pleasures. But alas, it appears all he contemplates, when not with his girls, are thoughts more befitting to a holy man."

The two walk through the palace and out to the garden, where there are flowers and a small orchard of fruit trees.

"My king, I suspect you overestimate your son, and the abilities of the seers who predicted at his birth that he would one day become a great holy man. I do not believe that he will ever want to give up this royal life; you have spoiled him; he is too soft. Even in spite of his great strength, it is not possible that he could ever survive outside the palace walls.

I hope you're right," the king picks a few figs and munches away. "If I were to lose him, it would be like losing my last link to his mother, the Lady Maya Deva, my wife whom I still mourn after these thirteen years that she's been gone.

"Fear not, my king and friend. I suspect you worry for no reason. Although I have been wrong before,

The palace grounds are dark and there is no moon this night. There's a slight overcast and few stars are seen. A perfect night," thinks Devadatta. He hears a rodent scurry by on the floor. And he patiently waits. The guard walks by, lantern swinging, making his rounds. No one would ever dare disturb the palace of the king. He just marches around the palace all night. Other guards are at the gates and the sleeping quarters of the king and prince, and no one would ever break into a royal library of all things! Not when there are much more valuable goods elsewhere in the palace.

Devadatta pulls the small candle from underneath his slightly damp robe, dampened to keep the candle from catching it on fire. He rummages through the small collection of journals and scrolls that belong to the prince, working quickly before the guard circles back.

He finds notes on growing plants, making medicines, religious notes on all the different gods and philosophers and seers. There are ponderings of the Upanishads. There are notes on sexual performance. Ah! He finds what he's looking for: the notes on their math lessons. Inside the scrolls and papers are drawings of lines demonstrating on one axis a line of numbers, on the second axis the square of those numbers. Clever. He's trying to work his way backwards, to find what number times itself will be equal to two. And there are other notes on a number times itself equal to negative one. And there are small rectangles drawn underneath the curves. And it's far too complicated for Devadatta to understand. He was hoping to steal the notes and knowledge of his cousin, but this is too much for him to deal with.

He packs many of the scrolls and pieces of paper into a sack and steals various other objects, so it won't appear like the notes of his cousin were the only things stolen. And he leaves to go back to his own house. Luckily he knows a secret hole in the palace wall. Along the way home he stops and lights Gautama's paper scrolls on fire, the work that has taken many, many years. Old Vswamitra will not be happy when he hears of this. Oh well, the wrinkled old goat always favored Gautama over Devadatta anyway.

The young black stallion rears and paws the air at the top of the small mountain. It's a beautiful clear day and far in the distance the Himalayan Mountains are a hazy gray-blue-purple. In the cold morning air steam pours out the great beast's nostrils.

Easy, Kantaka, the young prince soothes his mighty steed. The horse can sense the prince's anxiety: soon the prince will have to marry. But why? Why does it have to be this way? He's happy just with the girls; he doesn't want to have to be shackled to a woman and children. It's nothing more than stupid tradition.

And the manner in which he is to meet and choose his bride. Could it be any more humiliating? The prince steers Kantaka to race down the mountain path at breakneck pace. But the horse is surefooted and would never fall. Girls, hundreds of them, are to be paraded in front of him, while he chooses "the one he prefers." Most men, he knows, would do anything for such an opportunity. But how is he supposed to choose just one from among hundreds? Like choosing one piece of fruit from a plate: how will he know by looking which is to be the best?

He finally takes Kantaka into the stables and has the groom clean and feed the powerful horse, probably one of the prince's best friends in the lonely palace.

Inside he is bathed with sweet soaps and perfumes, massaged with soothing oils, and clothed in the most delicate fabrics by his handmaidens. It feels good, but this is all he has ever known. And then he plays host to his father's friends, playing the game of politics. Rich kings, queens, and nobles come from across the land to offer their daughters' hands in marriage. The prince wonders if he could perhaps take two or three wives. The prince is asked to show off his strength, just so that these people can make sure that their daughters will have a healthy mate. He has trained with sword, bow and arrow, and horse riding. And the prince's reputation precedes him. Indeed all are impressed and happy to be getting the prince's daughters for their prize.

The ceremony is a feast of gigantic proportions. Several lambs and goats were slaughtered, a giant wagon of fruit and cooked dishes were prepared. Even prince Gautama, accustomed to such things, is much impressed with the festive display.

The girls enter the giant hall room, one at a time, each looking their best, and each to receive a gift from the prince himself. The first girl is a real beauty, surely she would make a good wife, yet still the prince would rather not have a wife at all. He gives her the best of all the presents, a necklace of the finest pearls. Girl after girl marches by, each taking their gift of perfume or silk, objects of silver or gold or precious stones. While most men would be amused with full anticipation and wonder, the prince starts to nod off, hardly paying the girls any attention at all. Only occasional nudges from his friend and chariot driver, Channa, keep him awake. That and his father staring at him crossly.

And finally the end of the line draws near. Seems that fate has saved the best for the last! It is not often that a girl can catch his eye, but her beauty is far beyond compare.

"My fair lady, speak, tell me your name," the prince requests.

"I am Gopa Yasodhara," she tells him.

"How is it that I could have never heard of you, a girl of such beauty?"

As tradition would have it, he speaks of how he had known her in former lives, how they had always been together as lovers throughout time. And she obviously feels the same: the prince is a handsome brute of masculinity and makes most young girls blush. But this girl is different. Not only is her beauty supreme, but also her confidence is overwhelming, and perhaps it is her best attribute.

Of course, to really impress her, a contest of strength and prowess will be staged where several suitors will attempt to win her hand, but none of them will ever defeat Prince Gautama!

With bleary eyes he wakes in the middle of the night to the sounds of his baby crying. His son, Rahula, has pooped himself for the second time tonight. And the caregivers, being typical servants, are never around at the exact moment they're needed. Prince Gautama goes and bangs on the door to the servant's sleeping quarters. Yasodhara, his wife, talks sweetly to baby Rahula, trying to hush her son. She would change the baby herself if only the prince would allow her to, but no, he says that kind of work isn't befitting for a future queen.

The baby wails and kicks and finally one of the servant girls, a girl who had had a baby of her own by Gautama (but the baby was considered illegitimate just because she is a servant and not of a higher caste), comes to put a clean diaper on Rahula. The baby suckles its mother's breast for a good while before becoming full again and sleepy.

The prince extinguishes the lamp and lies in bed, wide awake though exhausted and red-eyed. What a burden this is. The prince's father, King Saddhodana, had jokingly named the baby Rahula, meaning fetter or shackle, a joke that is quite serious, and in being serious becomes a joke. Along that way of thinking lies madness, Gautama muses. He rises up out of

his soft bed, his wife now fast asleep, and he paces around the palace, as for the last year and a half he has grown accustomed to doing. A seventeen-year-old royal man—especially a prince—he thinks—should not be subjected to his sort of life.

He walks out to the horse pen, where Kantaka is. The powerful black stallion trots up to the fence, hoping for a treat and Gautama obliges with a juicy ripe pear. He brushes his old friend's mane and scratches its head. Tomorrow, thinks the prince, I will go out into the city in disguise. He has been to the outlying town many times before, but somehow it just never seemed right. People always seemed to be rejoicing in a festive manner whenever his chariot or carriage drew near—they knew he was a prince. How will they behave when they think that he is just an ordinary person? That he will discover tomorrow.

The warmth of the blanket as he snuggles down in his soft bed underneath the covers in a fetal position gives him some small degree of comfort. His brain reels at the sights he's seen. Many times in the last few weeks he's ventured incognito to out of the palace, with only his friend Channa by his side. People strain in the fields every day just for rice that will be eaten; they labor over crafts that will some day be broken—everything they do is temporary, yet still they struggle. And for what reward? Nothing more than a broken body worn out with age and finally death. He had never seen these things before, only heard them briefly mentioned. All his life he had been sheltered and pampered while others' lives are full of such intense misery that he can scarcely believe it—only he hadn't seen it with his own eyes.

Yet this one old man he had met on the side of the road—a seer, a prophet—dared to rebel against the cycle of life and death and all of its hardships. This one lone man he had met, skin and bones, attempted to break the cycle, accepting whatever pain or misery came his way, yet not giving into it—not letting it win. So how can he, Gautama, do the same? Is it possible? Can he leave his family, his heritage, to become a rishi, a holy wanderer? Will he end his cycle of birth, death, and rebirth? Will he find an end to misery? He must try!

So. It seems all the seeds you've sown, all the circumstances you've arranged, have finally borne fruit. Only a man who has experienced everything good that life has to offer can even contemplate leaving it all to find something that lies beyond the visible realm. Only someone of his caliber can fathom the beauty of absolute mental perfection. But is he ready? Will he be able to overcome all obstacles? And if so, will he share with others what he knows? Does he have what it takes to unite the human race into one heart and mind so that they will be prepared to accept what you have to offer?

You need to give him a test of mental and psychological discipline—temptations like no one on earth could ever imagine!

With his eyes shut, his strong spine upright and straight, he sits with legs folded. He has been traveling for a month and is exhausted. In all his short life he's never known such hardship. The food he begs for along the way is next to intolerable—disgusting, filthy, and nauseating. And he must say he loves it every bite of it. The differences between his new life and his old are as night and day. He revels in each new experience, soaking up the smells, flavors, and sensations as though he were a sponge. Each new pain, each new hunger and craving—even in their most intolerable forms—are for him, new worlds to explore. What he cannot understand is how others have been nurtured in such environments, how can they go their entire lives living as they do, in poverty, pain, and hunger?

In his exhaustion the once-prince falls into a deep trance, having eaten a mango he picked in the Anupiya grove, the first real sustenance he's had in days. His stomach feels as though it's going to collapse. Sitting under the mango tree he enters another world.

His wife beckons to him beautiful and naked, virgin as the day they were married. He wants to go to her to rest in her arms, to love her to comfort her and tell her that he is alright. His baby son is there as well and strangely he can speak! Father, I need you! baby Rahula pleads with his father to return home. Gautama cries, knowing that a son should have a father but this path he has chosen to be a holy wanderer until he can show mankind a way to end all pain and tragedy. It is far greater than anything else he could ever do, even be a father.

The girls he knew as a youth all of them lounge scrumptiously on a large divan of finest silk, with baskets of fruit and cooked meats. They are waiting for his passionate embrace. His horse, Kantaka, whinnies and rears up pawing the air ready to be raced through the hills around the palace. His friends all stand laughing with their horses, ready to go hunting, or discussing philosophy or math, or listening to music or any one of a thousand princely activities. All these things he could easily have again. It is not uncommon for a king to have a wife and other women servants or even many wives. All this could easily be his.

And all the lands of earth are spread before him. Its enormity of size is so dizzying that he about, topples over. He never imagined the world was so big. Yet there it is! As plain as his hand in front of his face. And it all could all be his! He could unite all the lands and peoples of the world into one mighty nation: his empire. His legacy to the world. The world the world. It is always back to the here and now. He opens his eyes, breathing heavily from the things he has just seen. Love is only temporary. Life is only temporary. The world is only temporary. And so he knows he must continue on his chosen path no matter how difficult no matter the things he has left behind. He must reach out to embrace whatever may come.

He now knows he that he is no longer Prince Gautama Siddhartha, but Gautama the beggar. For seven days he has sat here meditating, and now he must go find what he seeks. Now he will go beg for food in the town Rajagaha.

Rats crawl across the floor and eat from his bowl of cold rice, the remains of what he ate this morning. The guards outside pace back and forth while other prisoners moan and curse their fates. Yet he remains unmoved and unmoving. He has told the jailers what he was doing in town. They didn't believe him because he doesn't look like any beggar or holy wanderer they've ever seen. His hands are soft, his speech and manners too refined. It was only logical to assume that he was a fugitive criminal from some other kingdom.

Today he goes to explain himself to the king. Painfully the guards drag him out of the poorly constructed jail that anyone could easily escape from (which is what the guards want so that they can have an excuse to put an arrow in a prisoner's back). Gautama says farewell to the few thieves and criminals that are also being held captive. And he is brought inside the Palace of King Bimbisara.

"Speak beggar! What are you doing in this town and where do you come from?" Wait I know you." The king shouts. "What have your soldiers done to this man?" He violently shoves the jail guards away. "You are Gautama Siddhartha. My daughter was presented to you, perhaps you don't remember. Why have you fled your home?"

King Bimbisara, I remember you and your beautiful daughter. Please do not misunderstand. Only two months ago I left home to become a rishi, a holy wanderer. My father is no doubt unhappy with this, but it is what I have chosen. I am searching for summam bonum, true and perfect peace and understanding. I only ask you, King Bimbisara, do not return me to my father's palace. I have given him a grandson to continue our lineage. I must now follow another path, not that of royal heritage but of finding a means to end the suffering of mankind. I seek pure enlightenment.

The king pauses and scratches his chin. Holy men, wise men and seers are greatly respected in their culture. Although he still has the appearance of a noble prince underneath his beggar's robes, that façade will soon erode. Go, Gautama, I am certain that you will find what you seek. But I only ask one favor of you."



What would that be, King Bimbisara?

When you find enlightenment and a way to end all suffering, please return here to visit my humble kingdom, bless it with your presence, and share with us what you find.

That, King Bimbisara, will be an honor. It is a promise.

When he sits motionless, pain does not exist. He has risen beyond it, gone deep into his mind. It is when he must move that the pain is unbearable. He knows he will never find true peace until he can rise above all pain, and conquer his body.

He has not taken nourishment or water in three days and he knows he must soon do so. He opens his eyes slowly, difficultly. The crust holding his eyelids together requires a good while for him to loosen apart enough for him to see. Then he moves one arm, slowly, carefully. The pain is overwhelming but welcome. If he had anything in his stomach he would surely vomit. Then he moves his other arm and unties his legs, taking half an hour to move into a kneeling posture so that he can crawl to the Nairana River's edge, twenty feet from where he sits. All he needs is a mouthful of water and maybe all the rice from his beggar's bowl.

His five followers are close by, themselves sitting in meditative postures, as starved and bedraggled as he. For six years they have followed his teachings and examples, for six years they have drawn closer and closer to summum bonum, pure enlightenment. Though they have not pushed themselves anywhere near as hard as Gautama.

Crawling to the river requires every bit of his effort. On his knees, he leans over the river and stares at the skeletal face that used to be so full of joy and happiness, now there is only pain and no hint of the man he once was. He dips his hand in to pull up some water. Every drop of cool water running down his throat he can feel with excruciating pain.

He is tossed about like a rag doll and he didn't even remember falling in. He sinks immediately, having no fat to keep him afloat. From down below, underneath the water, everything is so peaceful and serene. He sees a fish swim by, completely ignoring him. All of his strength has left him and there is no way that he will ever be able to make it back to shore. He sits at the bottom of the river, feeling the squishy mud between his toes, and hopes that in his next life he will find the peace he searches for. He closes his eyes and prepares for death.

Gautama reflects on all that he has learned, all the lessons he was taught by all the great masters before he set out, accompanied by his five companions. The meditation he found easy, so simple it was, and so, for him to find that peaceful state of mind that is neither thought nor non-thought, as Uddaka Ramaputta had taught him how. And all these years he had spent starving and mastering his body in the land of Uruvela, and teaching his techniques to his five companions. Through all types of weather he and his disciples had endured. And now he is to die, his goal unfilled, still lacking summum bonum, perfect inner peace and understanding.

As he prepares for darkness and reincarnation he feels a pain under his arms and a chilly breeze strikes his face and nearly bakes his pelt. The pressure under his arms, from the girl lifting him out of the water as though he were only a small child, nearly tears his arms from their sockets. He lies panting and heaving, coughing up water, shivering by the riverside. The girl wraps a layer of cloth around him and holds him until she sees he can again hold himself upright. She offers him a small bit of fruit and a bowl of cooked rice and lentils. He eats a small amount, a handful, but it is far more than he has eaten at one time in over a year.

Even though his five companions sit close by, meditating, they are far too weak to have helped him out of the river. Indeed, they have not even heard the commotion.

Kind girl, tell me your name. But when he looks up, she is gone, as if she were never really there. Except for the bag of fruits and vegetables that she left behind. It must have been one of the local shepherd's daughters. Probably Sujata, she always puts rice in his bowl.

Little does Gautama know that it was you that pulled him out of that river and gave him a 2<sup>nd</sup> chance. Will he recognize the foolishness of self-afflicted punishment? Will he see the carelessness of self-indulgence? He has experienced both to the furthest extremes. There must be a better way he thinks. He eats the fruit and takes all the food that his stomach will allow to gain back enough strength to walk. The human body is remarkably resilient and it takes him little over a month before he has the strength to search elsewhere for his goal. His companion-students cannot believe what they are seeing – their own teacher losing faith in the ways of ascetics. They now ignore him, treat him as someone beneath them. No matter, in time they too will learn what their master has realized – that extremes lead to dead ends, and dead ends lead nowhere.

Tathagata, please tell us again of the time you achieved summum bonum, enlightenment, release. One of the many young students eagerly asks for a description of the state of pure happiness so that he will know what he ever achieves such a lofty goal.

The old teacher looks out over the hill at his hundreds of followers encamped in the park, come to hear him speak. He looks out over all the tents and is pleased that so many have come to recognize the gift he has to offer, and therefore have come to join his sangha, monastic order.

But of course, he tells the student, always happy to encourage others. After I had realized that both materialism and asceticism are self-indulgent, I went to contemplate all that I had learned, to logically sort out what could and could not be known with certainty. I walked far and long. While traveling, I intercepted a herdsman taking his flock to be sacrificed before King Bimbisara, who I had met many years before. I implored the king not to kill these animals, for in the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, we should not interfere with even the slightest animal on its path toward spiritual growth and enlightenment. To end its life is to block the road along this path. We should not be obstacles to other beings, either men or animals, in the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, just as we would not want others to be an obstacle on our journey upward.

The king spared the animals and from that day forward has abandoned the practice of sacrifice. The Buddha stops for a sip of water. But still I had not found summum bonum or Nirvana. So I returned to Uruvela, in the area where I had undergone my ascetic practices and had almost starved myself to death. At that time I was so emaciated that you could wrap two hands around my waist. My muscles and ligaments were so weak that you could have pulled me apart. But when I almost drowned, I realized that there is no good in suffering. And I slowly ate food again and regained my strength little by little.

The disciples, many hundreds of them gathered around, all remain absolutely quiet so they can hear the master speak. He has lost his focus and order of events a bit with old age. But still the great inner peace radiates from him and comforts everyone who listens.

At any rate, after visiting King Bimbisara, I returned to Uruvela and sat myself under a fig tree – a bo tree. I sat and contemplated all that I had learned over the years.

This much is certain. To live is to suffer. We all know this, it is obvious. And if one is not prepared for Nirvana, then he will be reborn again and again, to suffer again and again. But what is the cause of suffering? Tathagata, once Gautama the rishi, asks of his disciple.

Tathagata, the cause of suffering is craving. To end suffering you must end craving, both the craving of that which is pleasurable and the craving to end that which is not pleasurable. Suffering can also be caused by ill will to others and by ignorance.

That is correct, of course. If these things are eliminated, suffering will be removed. This is a long, difficult path, but I have done it and continue to do so. And how can these cravings be removed? Tathagata queries another pupil.

By following the eightfold path, the student plainly states.

That is correct. And you have listened well. Can you state them? Tathagata always keeps his students on their toes.

Yes, Tathagata. One must have Right Understanding of oneself: see oneself without distortion. Understand oneself in form, perceptions, sensations, psychic disposition, and consciousness. One must have Right Thoughts and attitude of mind: by renouncing sensory pleasures, by harboring kind thoughts opposed to ill will, and keeping thoughts of harmlessness. One must always have Right Speech by speaking only kind words, never lying, slandering, using harsh words or frivolous, useless talk. One must have Right Action or conduct which means following the five precepts: Avoid and abstain from killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying (which includes slander and deceit), and laziness, which includes thrill seeking and taking stimulants. One must have Right Livelihood by earning a living that is beneficial to all and never dealing in deadly weapons, livestock, slavery, intoxicants, or poisons. One must always conduct himself with Right Effort, which is fourfold: avoid that which is evil, prevent evil from occurring, to develop that which is good, and to promote new forms of goodness. One must also have Right Mindfulness, which is also fourfold: one must be aware of one's body at the moment, one must be aware of the emotions that exist within oneself, one must be aware of one's mind and not be absorbed in emotion, and one must be attentive to mental objects and phenomena. One must also practice Right Meditation, focusing one's full attention upon an object to attain a well-disciplined mind.

That is absolutely correct. Tathagata speaks encouragingly to the young student who still has much to learn. He purposefully neglects to add to the student's recitation the five hindrances, the five aggregates of existence, the six subjective-objective sense factors, and many many other concepts. Instead he merely continues: "All these things that you mention are requirements to merely begin searching for enlightenment. The path to enlightenment is the most difficult endeavor one can undertake."

When I was sitting under the bo tree I knew what I had to do, rid myself of all craving, all ill will, filling my thoughts with only goodness and kindness. The eightfold path is difficult to master, more difficult than I had ever imagined. As I strove for clear, controlled thought, Mara the Temptor came before me, as he had when I left home and began my quest. But the sensations were stronger than I have ever felt in my entire life. Selfishness, Doubt, False Scruple, Passion, Hate, Desire for Longevity, Fame, Pride, Self-Righteousness, these and many more of Mara's soldiers assailed my mind and attempted to make my thoughts become as theirs. But I prevailed, drove these things from my inner being to prepare myself for pure peace.

And when at last I had found true, perfect inner peace, I was overcome with a sense of complete happiness and rapture, without any longing for earthly pleasures. I began to think more clearly than I ever had before. My mind expanded outward into the world. Or perhaps it expanded into my mind. Who can say? It is not important. I reached a state of knowledge that was overwhelming and almost impossible to bear. All the universal laws of life and death became clear to me, all the reasons why the world is the way it is, why things fall when you drop them. It all became as clear as a pure mountain stream. At this point I had reached a state of abhinna, pure truth.

The next stage is something that cannot be explained in words; you will have to experience it for yourselves. All pleasure and pain becomes meaningless. A state of mind is attained which is neither thought nor non-thought. Yet in this I had realized the four noble truths and the eightfold path, the way to enlightenment. I knew at that moment I had reached an end of suffering, and that for me there would be no more rebirths. I had achieved the end of the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. And I knew that I had to bring this Dharma, the Law, the Way, to whosoever would listen, to show them how to break the cycle of suffering.

But now I am weary and must retire to my tent," Tathagata told his pupils and they helped their elderly teacher to his bed.

Of course having never had their every least desire fulfilled to the utmost excess, most people will never be able to truly shrug off the yoke of craving and desire. The great Buddha failed to realize this, failed to realize even how he was able to manage it (with your help). Though manage it he did, his mind, without any doubt whatsoever, indicates that this race of beings can rise to be something more than just thinking apes.

And, like all living things, he who would come to be known as the Buddha decayed into death. Yet not entirely. You raise him up to the heavens, body and all, to your hidden dimensional hideout, leaving behind a replica shell for his followers to incinerate, so that he may sit with Moshe to watch the fate of the world unfold.

Your Chosen Ones have failed you. Even still they look to the external world rather than within themselves for hope and salvation. They have been beaten and driven into subservience by and to the Roman Empire. Perhaps they need yet another divine sign, something miraculous to make them understand what it is that you're hoping to show them, that their power and knowledge can be limitless, if only they'd try. If only they'll try. You need a more direct route.

Miriam guiltily relaxes with her new lover, her first, Yoseph, not yet wed to him. While her mother and father are away she's stolen this semi-forbidden pleasure, but she isn't unhappy with the choice she's made. And neither it seems, is Yoseph, from the grin on his face.

He's a good, strong man, a journeyman and widower from Bethlehem in Galilee, just a two-hour walk from Miriam's village. Soon they will be wed and Yoseph will come to live in Nazareth with Miriam and her family. And his two children from his previous marriage will come with him. But first he will have to construct more room for them all. So he spends a good deal of his time working on the house of Miriam's family.

She thinks she has a moment's privacy. Her family should be tending the fields and orchards. They know, perhaps hopelessly, that she's alone with this handsome widower. They have given her time to talk with him, to get to know each other a little better. Her parents have, as parents will, underestimated her lust. Only two older women are in the house, but they stay mostly to themselves at the other end of the large family house, never bothering Miriam in her chambers where the young girls all live. Her family has no idea of her strong independent mind to ignore convention and take what she desires. And how can you not approve?

Miriam's startled with the terror of being discovered as she hears the pitter-patter of sneaky feet in the house just outside her chamber door. Perhaps, she hopes, it is only one of her sisters. Yoseph is passed out cold and won't awaken when she shakes his shoulder. Volently, desperate, she slaps his face, but he won't come around. She jumps up and begins to put on her tunic when the doorway curtain to her chamber is pulled aside. A man, a dark stranger, stands in her chamber doorway. At first she's terrified, but the man touches her on the forehead and she seems to lose a little will of her own. And that is the last thing that she remembers of him.

The stench in the room is unmistakable, that of sex. Her cheap incense barely disguises it and she fears that someone will notice the odor. The pain she feels deep within her is a most unbearable. She can't understand it. Yoseph was very gentle, and very good. Perhaps the pain of sex is something felt long afterwards. She's never discussed it with anyone. The cheap cloth Yoseph brought with him is soaked in her blood. She bundles it up and hides it away. And that strange dream she had? She can't believe they both had fallen asleep like that. No one ever told her that sex would make you do that. Yoseph wakes and they quickly get dressed, fearfully hoping that they weren't discovered while in their careless slumber.

'I'd never be wed to a mamzer!' A young girl says to her giggling friends just loudly enough for young Yeshua to hear.

What a great way to start the Shabbath morning, he thinks as he watches the girls strut away giggling and whispering cruelly as ever. If only his father Yoseph, were still alive, then the others wouldn't treat him this way. Yoseph would have seen to that! Sheama! Yeshua greets a group of boys his own age as they pass by on their way to the synagogue, where Yeshua isn't allowed to enter. They return the greeting, but only half heartedly, not wanting to associate themselves with an impure mamzer, a Jew of suspect lineage. He hangs his head and walks away toward the wilderness area quite some distance east of the village to contemplate the Kingdom of his Abba, his father, the Father of All Creation, the Kingdom of God.

The barley fields are lush and the grassy areas are refreshing. The olive trees are green and fertile, promising a productive year. His breakfast of chickpeas and a small bit of mutton have made him slightly gassy this morning. All sounds are music in the Kingdom of God.

An old wandering Rabbi has been seen in the woods nearby, and he's hoping to meet the old man, to talk with him on holy matters. But the old man isn't to be found this day. So Yeshua wanders and wanders through the forests of pine, oak, and cypress, ever alert for dangerous animals and thieves. Not that he really has to worry about them. But if his mother knew he walked out this far, he'd be in big trouble.

A sunny clearing, a small patch of flat limestone, is just what he needs. There he sits cross-legged, closes his eyes, and opens his mind to embrace his surroundings. In his mind he can feel the living ground beneath him, the insects and even smaller things. He can feel the plants growing and the air moving around him, the clouds above gliding through the sky. He can feel the streams, budding flowers, and animals playing and frolicking in the spring warmth. And he feels pain, the trees and plants eaten by insects, the insects eaten by birds and rodents, and so on and so forth. Life must be this way, he knows. Out of the struggle come strength, renewal, and upward growth.

Some short distance away he feels intense pain, what he was looking for. It's the pain of starvation and injury. He opens his eyes, stands, and walks to find its origin. It is one of the most dangerous animals he knows of, a male leopard. It lies under a bush, its jaw broken, skinny from not being able to eat, and waiting for death. These are the things Yeshua hopes to find. He enters the creature's mind, exerting a calming effect, talking to it.

His mother told him never to do this, she always tried to hide the abilities God had given to Yeshua. No one knows, can guess at, or even dream about the things he's capable of doing. He touches the leopard gently on its face and belly, healing its jaw as its ribs become layered with flesh and fat. It licks Yeshua's hand and rubs its head against him while purring quietly. Yeshua tells it to please refrain from hunting the humans, flocks and herds of sheep and livestock. The leopard goes its way, confused, grateful, and obedient. And surprised to discover that there is more pleasure to life beyond mere basic survival.

If an animal can feel this, thinks Yeshua, what is humanity capable of feeling?

Even though he's hungry, even though he's frightened and misses his family, he knows he's made the right choice. He holds a small bowl, he had found and begs for money or food, accepting any alms he can get, although preferring food to money. He never did trust money.

In just under a month he's made more friends than he can count. People accept him for who he is. Though they're not all the most desirable of people, he still feels a certain bond to them. And at least the girls are more than willing to speak with him, unlike those back in Nazareth who acted as though even being seen in his presence would ruin their reputations. One girl from the other side of the city even wanted to be alone with him, but somehow he just didn't feel right about it. She laughed and said something about a small town boy in Jerusalem. He hasn't seen her since then. Oh well. Winter is coming on fast this year and he'll have to find shelter soon.

He tried to get work as a journeyman but not with so many skilled carpenters in this enormous metropolis. Even though he can't get into the temple, he goes every day to at least see it, the great bronze doors opening up, the smoke from the holy altar fires. The Kingdom of God is at hand, he knows this all too well. It is in the Torah, in the air he breathes, the water he drinks, the ground under his feet. It is in the sky above in the sun and stars. But it is not in the priests and pontiffs that plague God's house. Soon there will be a cleansing, Yeshua knows this with all his heart, mind, and soul. On that day the Kingdom of God will belong to every man, woman, and child, not just these elite pompous asses who pretend to do God's work. On that day everyone will be able to sacrifice at the temple!

But in the meantime survival is paramount. He must find a means of living through the winter. It is said that a Rabbi Yochanan the Immerser is offering purification from sin for the pilgrims coming to Jerusalem. He and his disciples have been staying near the Jordan River, far away from the city and civilization. This Yochanan fellow thinks Yeshua is someone he'd like to learn from, someone with whom he would like to discuss the Kingdom of God as he sees it, belonging not just to those who can afford it, but belonging to everyone!

It is still several days to walk to reach Galilee. Yeshua and his fellow disciples, ex-disciples, he sadly supposes, need rest. Night draws n on them, bringing with it all the dangers of nighttime in the wilderness, and all the beauty. The stars up in the firmament of Heaven shine down brightly, the gates to Heaven guarded by angels. Yeshua looks up at them, staring and awestruck just as he did as a child. He munches a couple of roasted locusts left over from the morning's breakfast while thinking of only one thing. Even as he mourns his lost friend and teacher, Yochanan, he still has a great focus of his disciplined mind. And that mind focuses, as it does every evening, on The Kingdom of God.

With his eyes closed his vision clears and he sees the Chanot of God. The Throne of God, moving through the sky and heavens, its wheels turning unlike any earthly wheels ever had, turning down and under and in upon themselves and inside out unfathomably, raving at the speed of lightning. It fills him with a deep inner peace and the spirit of God descends upon him like a dove, spreading its white wings over and around him, protecting like a father, wrapping him in a sense of security and purpose.

All this he remembers from his Kabballah, his private teachings that he received from his rabbi Yochanan.

After the enrapturing peace, Yeshua allows himself to mourn the loss of his beloved friend and rabbi Yochanan the Immerser. How much he'd learned under his tutelage. And Yeshua soon grew beyond his rabbi's teachings. While Yochanan had preached to Jews of freedom from sin through immersion in God's holy waters, Yeshua saw that all people, even the gentiles, are capable of having their sins cleansed from them, and not merely by immersion in water, but also by receiving communion with God in feasts or in prayer. Indeed, even allowing the rabbi into the homestead and accepting the blessings of God would cleanse oneself and one's family of sin. However, Yeshua almost never voiced his opinions about gentiles being freed from sin, to say such a thing would certainly make other Jews, even Yochanan, see him as a heretic.

Yochanan didn't always see eye-to-eye with Yeshua, though the two were very close, almost like brothers. Yochanan even nicknamed him The Lamb of God. However, he thought his pupil's methods were a bit too improvised. But now the beloved Rabbi Yochanan is dead, having been decapitated by Antipas' soldiers. If only Yochanan hadn't spoken out against Antipas being married to his own brother's wife. But it is a vast sin, Yeshua supposes, breaking the laws of incest. Yeshua only hopes that Antipas hasn't ordered Yochanan's scattered disciples arrested and killed, he being one of them.

Yochanan was a great man, and he will be sorely missed. Thanks Yeshua, unable to repress a teardrop. So much he had taught him, not merely about God, but also about politics and survival in the wilderness. If only Yochanan had practiced survival in the politics of Rome.

Nathanael and Philip strike up a small fire to keep wild oxen away. They too, of course, share in mourning the great Rabbi and friend. But the night makes the night red, and they must sleep. Yeshua to volunteers first watch.

Nathanael rouses Yeshua and Philip at first light. A few stars remain visible and they mesmerize Yeshua as they always have. After packing up camp, folding their camel hair blankets, and slating their appetites and grumbling stomachs with a few wild dates, some olives, and greens, the prayers begin.

A deep humming chant fills the air with praise of God in Heaven: The Provider, The Creator. And they mourn the loss of their fallen leader, the beheaded Yochanan the Immerser. At least, thinks Yeshua, it was a quick death, he wasn't tortured. He could even have been crucified!

The strongest sensation, a comprehension of higher power, an almost rude interruption shakes Yeshua to his core. It is his Abba—his Father—the Father of All Creation. And He is sorely disappointed. But it is not an emotional disappointment. Rather it is composed of pure reason and crystal perfection. It tears into Yeshua's consciousness: God wants things to be different. He is not to use the term loosely, happy. Yeshua's task is to use his power to unite the human race into one mind, one goal, to show them a new way to live, and to show them the power that can be theirs, if only they reach for it. Perfection of mind, eternal life, and freedom from pain—it can all be theirs, if only the human race will reach for it, make some sort of effort. And they will. Yeshua will see to it. It is an order from God, not a mere request. It will be done. His will be done. On Earth as it is in Heaven. As Below so Above and Beyond, he imagines.

Yeshua shudders and snaps out of his trance, seeing Nathanael and Philip looking at him like he has gone crazy.

"I was speaking with my Father. Do you doubt me?"

They wisely do not dispute his claim; they know him all too well. While Yeshua has never been violent or harmed anyone, his rage is a powerful unseen force that is not to be tampered with.

Before setting out on the journey to their homeland, Galilee, they decide it might be best to catch and roast at least a dozen locusts to add themselves over while traveling. Finding locusts is a chore. Even though the large bugs are usually slow in the morning. The men separate to cover more ground. In a few minutes they return. Nathanael has caught three, Philip only two. And Yeshua sits on the ground, cross-legged. He had never left, it seems. Yet on the ground before him are fifteen dead locusts, their legs and wings removed, ready to be roasted in a small clay pot in the fire. The two men stare in amazement.

"Through my Father anything is possible," Yeshua explains, his eyes still closed. Slowly he opens them. "Add your locusts to these and roast them."

Not a word is spoken as they travel. Besides being uneasy with Yeshua and his strange ways, the men wish to avoid being heard by soldiers who might be searching for followers of Yochanan. Frequently they skirt around the main road, and travel through the wilderness. They march quickly and efficiently, stopping only occasionally to relieve themselves, rest, or snack on fruits, greens, or locusts.

A strange tension builds between Yeshua and the two men. They can sense a greater purpose in him now, some enormous change taking place. Nathanael and Philip are admittedly afraid, but not understanding what they are afraid of, they barely realize their fear.

They are half-a-day's walk north of Jericho. The day grows hotter as they proceed onward, scanning the horizon for a stream or well at which they can slake their mounting thirst and fill their



water bottles. A young boy herding his flock of sheep is kind enough to point the way to a nearby village where there is a well just outside of town.

Nathanael and Philip sneer in distaste at the boy, who is obviously a local boy, a Samaritan. And all Samaritans are filthy, scourges on the earth, disgraces to the House of Judea, more closely related to Gentiles than Jews. And Yeshua surprisingly sneers at the men. They can feel his disapproval at their attitude. And, even though Yeshua's psychic scolding is powerful, it is not enough to overcome a lifetime of prejudice and the men clutch to their opinions and ideas as drowning men clutch to a floating piece of wood.

Quite some time passes before they finally reach the well, yet they feel somewhat foolish they have nothing to draw up the water with. They have no rope or string to lower their bottle into the well. The women kick the ground, frustrated. Yeshua merely stares at the village some ways off. Nathanael and Philip know what he is thinking.

No! 'You can't be serious! You can't ask Samaritans for help!' Nathanael protests. Philip just shakes his head in disbelief at the depths to which Yeshua will sink. Still, he ignores them and walks toward the village. The two men can see him at the village and they see what he is doing. They slap their foreheads when they see his stupidity. Not only does this fanatic actually have to speak with Samaritans, he has to speak to one of their women. Soon he returns with a dipper that has a long string attached to it.

He lowers the dipper down into the well, and draws up the sweet water he was craving. "This water here in this dipper is nothing! The words of my Father are as water which will leave you to never thirst again, and give you eternal life!"

They feel the truth of his words and actions. They know that the Samaritans are people as lost in this large, confusing world as are they. They feel the power of God, The Father of All Creation. They know what is true and right, they know it as surely as they know the sky is blue. Yet some part of them wishes they had remained ignorant of these things. It is too comfortable to cling to the past, the ideas and prejudices with which one has been raised.

The next day Yeshua awakens to find himself completely alone in the wilderness. It seems his friends, companions at any rate, have abandoned him. Obviously they are too weak and afraid to cope with the Truth of God, to allow The Kingdom of God into their hearts.

Father! "How do I make them understand?" he shouts to the heavens and receives no answer. And he really expected none. Why does he of all people have to be charged with this enormous responsibility? And now he'll have to face his family alone. Will they still be bitter that he ran away from them in order to live in Jerusalem? Strangely he feels not one bit of regret. When he left them he felt something pulling at his heart. The Kingdom of God. And he followed it.

The rocks have torn his flesh badly and he bleeds from at least a dozen wounds. Part of his lip dangles from his cheek. One of his smaller fingers is broken, his left eye swollen shut. Still they doubt him. After all he is done and shown them, after he pronounced them all clean and worthy of God's Kingdom. He had proclaimed the man with skin lesions as clean. Open sores would surely ruin a man's life. Yet still Yeshua embraced the man, comforted him, told him to go be with his family. And the man's sores healed within a week. Had he not driven bad spirits and decadence from men merely with his presence? The demons of lust and greed would writhen in agony, trying to take control of the afflicted men, as they had all of their tortured lives. And had not Yeshua freed many a man and woman from their impure ways, casting out these lascivious desires? Had he not shown them the path to The Kingdom of God?

And this is the thanks he receives. Typical, he sadly supposes. They are hardly different from the decadent fools in Capernaum who associate themselves with prostitutes and allow strange

ridiculous gods into their homes. And they call themselves Jews, servants of God. Shameful. They are more dedicated to profit than to God! It is more painful than the rocks that now strike his head and body. He cries out in pain, blood soaking his long hair and tunic. It will not end like this. He will show them the way to the Kingdom of God! But not these, his uneducated country kinfolk! They will never know the paradise of sitting in the presence of the Chariot of God!

The next wave of rocks grows in intensity. More people are joining in, even his brothers. His mother Miriam looks away, more out of shame than concern for her son. Yeshua supposes he shouldn't have invoked the prophesy of Isaiah, claiming to be the chosen one, 'but he is'. And they must know it! Now, they will.

The large rocks fly and his death is as certain as the sunrise. He is kneeling on the ground, cowering, preparing to die as anyone who is being stoned to death. No one expects what happens next. The rocks freeze in mid-air. Five of them. Five large stones. Frozen as if time has stopped. Yeshua stands slowly and purposefully. The mindless masses of Nazareth bow their heads to the ground, screaming, praying to God to protect them from this evil blasphemous spirit. Those few who dare to look see the impossible. His blood rises off the ground and runs up his arms and legs, into his wounds, and his wounds close as though not one single stone had ever touched him. The people scream and run amuck. The five stones hover around Yeshua's head, his long hair rises around his semi-bald head, yet there is no wind.

With a voice like thunder he preaches.

'Break the arm of the wicked and evil. Search out wickedness until it cannot be found. My Father is the Lord and King for all eternity! And the nations will perish from His Earth! He raises his arms up into the air. He repeats the words that had angered the Nazareth priests to order him to be killed by stoning. The Spirit of the Lord is upon you and you shall be messengers of triumph to the poor. And He has delegated me to proclaim to the captives release, and to the blind sight, and I will free the broken with release, and I will proclaim the acceptable Year of the Lord! Even over the noise of the panicking masses, his voice is clearly heard. The large stones, those that were thrown at him, rise with a will of their own into the air and explode with a thunder that knocks the people to their knees. He turns and walks away, never to see his birthplace or family again. Had these backwards people beeniterate they would have had the good fortune to record this event.

The old man's only possessions are his tunic, his begging bowl, and his stretcher, two sticks and a rough cloth. He also possesses doubt, resentment, and anger towards life, among many other pent-up emotions, none of them good.

He gathers with dozens of cripples, poor and destitute, awaiting the healing power of the water. In reality he, like most of the others, comes here to receive alms and food. Some of his friends are kind enough to carry him from place to place. He hates having to rely on them, but what choice does he have?

When the dam is opened, its water runs from the north to the south pool with a babbling gush. All the people around him work themselves into the traditional religious frenzy, praying and immersing themselves in the holy living waters of God, cleansing themselves of sin and Incess. He is a skeptic and he knows he best keep his opinions to himself, that is if he wants to receive alms. It is just as well, he thinks, that he cannot arise from his stretcher and immerse in the holy waters as the others do.

A blur approaches him (he never could see well). And apparently this blur is a comedian of sorts. 'Would you like to walk again?' it asks! The audacity of these religious rebels that plague Jerusalem like fleas on a dog! Still, he knows he'd better play along. At the very least they will assist him to the water's edge and help him to bathe without fear of drowning. He goes along with the charade so as not to offend all the people around him. 'Of course, master!'

The blur draws closer and resolves itself into a short, slightly rotund, bald man who reaches forward and lays hands on him.

Instantly all doubt is removed from his mind, and replaced with unimaginable fear and awe. Everything around him disappears and he stands face to face with absolute perfection and knowledge embodied in an indescribable being—yet somehow the being has no physical body, just a mind—the perfect mind. And he knows what it wants, what God wants. For mankind to become as it is, a task that seems beyond impossible.

It saturates his entire being, giving him the merest glimpse of infinite power. His body is sent to a plane of existence that his mind cannot comprehend, but he sees it, he knows it is real. And he is purged of all the poisons within him, both physical and emotional. The pain is unbearable, but necessary—like having poison bars withdrawn from every facet of one's being.

His next reaction is the most surprising of all. For an eternity it seems he bursts into uncontrollable, abysmal laughter. And he wishes he hadn't.

His eyes snap open and view the world with crystal clarity, yet his mind reels. He is obviously healed, but at what price? Of one thing he is certain—man should never witness such appalling things.

Anse: "You are healed from your afflictions and your sins! Take up your stretcher, carry it away! Tell everyone you have seen The Kingdom of God," the holy man commands.

It has been such a long time since the old man could even move his toes, yet he rises, slowly, unsteady, his muscles weak, but he can walk nonetheless. He can walk. However, he reflects on the ordeal he has just been through, and the things he has seen and witnessed, the memories that he knows will haunt him the rest of his life. And he wonders: "Was it worth it?"

Much has happened since Yeshua's fledgling days as a rabbi and Messenger of God. Many people have come to understand just what he is—who he is—the one who will bring the Kingdom of God to Earth. All over Galilee he has thousands of followers, people who have witnessed the Glory of God. And soon he will bring God's power to Earth. He will rend the veil of reality and usher in an endless age of absolute perfection. Even the foolish Gentiles will end their sinning ways.

His followers honor him as he rides toward the temple on a donkey they had given him. They wave willow branches and palm fronds before him, placing them on the ground before him, even offering their own clothing as carpet for the rabbi. He cannot help but feel touched at the faith of all these people. It has been ages, since he was a boy, when he was last here. Galileans, Syrians, Essenes from as far away as Egypt, and even Samaritan Jews all flock around him. He is truly God's shepherd as well as lamb.

Already Yeshua can smell the cooking meat on the sacrificial fires of the altar—the aroma of the Sukkoth feast—the festival of fall harvest. The prophecy of Zechariah is at hand. The Kingdom of God will soon be upon Earth—and every man, woman, and child.

Oh, the songs in praise of Yhwh! The animals being brought to the sacrificial altar! The Father of All Creation will indeed be much pleased.

He rides to Mount Zion and bathes at the blessed waters, cleansing himself, preparing to enter the temple. As he ascends the steps, giant torches light the path in the stairwell just as he remembers from when he was a child. The light brightly reflects off gold and silver, but even this light will pale next to the Light of God. And he arrives at the Great Temple Courtyard, fully expecting the full glory of God to descend upon the world as a dove.

When he stands in the opening to the Great Temple Courtyard what he instead sees is utter madness from his worst nightmares. His eyes are smitten with an ugly truth. A helplessness he has never known falls upon him with the full weight of the enormous altar stones. He sees an appalling revelation that blasts his soul with an icy wind—the high priest, Caiaphas, has allowed vendors into

the temple! They're selling all manner of sacrificial offerings: wheat, barley, wine, fowl, sheep, cattle, and oxen being the most prominent. The temple—the holiest place on earth—has been turned into a barnyard! The animals are defecating all over the house of God. Never has Yeshua been so angered and humiliated in his entire life!

He reaches deep within himself, preparing to use his powers to purge the temple of this filth and blasphemy. The air crackles around him; a fire burns in his eyes, and his hair around his mostly bald head sticks out straight from his head. His followers around him instinctively know something big is coming, and they prepare for the miracle of miracles.

And then it's gone. His powers vanish along with all his dreams. He turns away with tears in his eyes, not realizing the power that his tears have on the people around him.

No matter—these blasphemers will be punished, even if he has to raise an army to do it!

Bad enough that you should be disappointed with mankind, but to see this failure in your very son! Who does he think he is, trying to bring your magnificence to these maggots who have not yet earned it? These ignorant barbarians who *still* sacrifice animals to you (and eat the flesh themselves as if somehow you might actually be pleased by all this pomp and ceremony! Stupid ancient superstition mostly perpetuated by Mosheh's writings.)

Good thing that Yeshua never came to realize his full powers (inherited from you) or you might have had a rival—a nemesis even. Good thing you put an end to it before it was too late. But then you could easily have foreseen such a thing and ended it in literally 0 seconds. Well, no more bestowing holy powers and gifts of insight to humans—there are so many more deserving races throughout the universe. Why do you keep meddling with these ridiculous slugs? What is it within you that holds you here, that draws you to the humans? And what will you do about this errant offspring of yours? Hmmm.

On the hill of skulls, Golgotha n, he staggers to the short post, naked as the day he was born, embarrassed beyond his wildest nightmares. He doesn't know which is worse: the searing pain across his shoulders and back from the lashings or the humiliation the soldiers inflicted him while he was in the jail—using him like a cheap harlot!

The crowd cheers at him. Cal down the Kingdom of God now, great prophet! Fly through the air to safety, oh Son of God!

Numb with emotional shock, he almost doesn't feel it when the thick nails bite into his hands and fasten him to the beam. He is lifted with his cross beam into the air by the strong soldiers, his feet dangling just a little off the ground, and tied to the post. The cross beam notched into the top of the pole, and ropes are tied around his waist and neck. Lastly his feet are nailed to the post.

He never thought he would see this—the high priest and the Romans working hand in hand, Jews breaking the laws of God. And killing their own.

Time drags by slowly for Yeshua. In the last hours of his life he reflects on a life that he's done. Slowly he realizes his mistake of trying to circumvent your authority by outright giving to the humans that which they have not yet earned—that which they must earn—the right to sit with you.

He stares out at the crowd. A few of his followers have braved being captured by the Roman forces and come to see this atrocity being inflicted on their teacher. Miriam of Magdala, Miriam the mother of two of his followers, their friend Martha, Shimon Rock (of course Shimon Rock would always be by his side), Eleazar, to name a few. He smiles knowing that at least he touched a few lives. But he wanted so much more, so much more.

A soldier, growing bored with the day's entertainment and anxious to return to the barracks and the brothels before nightfall (a new young slave girl has just been brought in and he'd been promised first crack at her), sticks his spear in Yeshua's side and twists.

*Eloi' Eloi' Lemma sabakhthuni''* (My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me? )  
He dies with tears dripping onto his chest

Early on Shabbath morning three days after Yeshua's crucifixion, Miriam of Magdala, Miriam of Yaaqov, and Shalome approach the tomb of their fallen friend and teacher. They come to pour fragrant oils on his body. Some kind soul mourning at the graveyard will surely help them roll away the stone that seals Yeshua's tomb, though all three of them could probably manage it themselves if need be. Yet someone has arrived before them: the stone has been rolled aside. Inside sits a man (or so they think), oddly relaxing against the wall of the tomb.

Yeshua's risen, the man says. Depart and tell Simon Rock and all Yeshua's students to seek him in Galilee: there you will see him.

The women turn away in amazement and fear, not quite certain what to make of all this. Miriam of Magdala turns back to see the place where her true love had lain and to ask the strange man in white robes a few questions, only to find 'the man in the tomb has vanished'. This she doesn't need! She only wishes she could have told Yeshua the news: she is with child.

Oh, what the hell! I more try. They I never make it otherwise. 3 semi-failures/partial successes, not good enough. You had appeared as various gods to primitive man, never realizing never conceiving that they'd invent their own. Where you'd mean to inspire awe and in turn, a striving toward greatness, they had invented various mindless melodramatic pantheons around the globe. Their strong sense of tradition and weak sense of logic keep the cycle of false gods going. To remedy this you sent them something more realistic, something they could relate to: messages from you to them via great men who were obviously tuned in to something greater than mediocrity. But the tales get twisted, the true meaning of the words are all too often lost.

Through Moshé they witnessed your power (though he was too violent). Through Gautama they saw a glimmering of your disciplined mind (though he was too dreamy). Through Yeshua, your son, an example of perfection and compassion that overcomes even programmed racial prejudices (though he was too ambitious and impatient: truly his father's son). And the humans still don't get it! No clue at all!

So, once again you plot and scheme. They respond more to beauty than truth. Can the 2 be combined into...? Who will it be *this time*? hmmm

Aminah lies sprawled on her back, sweating in pain on a camel hair blanket, her legs wide apart, contractions coming more frequently now. Searing pain stretches her open and she's only slightly relieved that the nine-month ordeal will soon be over. How many women had given birth here in the home of her uncle, Wuhayb? How many generations have been? How many will there be? She is thankful to be under the care of her uncle, the chief of the Zuhrah tribe since her father had passed away, taken by the mighty hand of Allah... or perhaps al-Lat... or al-Uzzah.

As her womb has filled with light and joy these last nine months, so too is her head filled with the pride she takes in being a woman. There's so much death in this world: it's a woman's duty (or privilege... or honor...) to have as many children as possible.

Pride, joy, and pain, sorrow, grief, worry, concern. Her man is gone, taken by Allah, or one of the many gods that now infest the Ka'bah (the first house of Allah's worship). Whichever had taken her husband away from her, it matters not: now he is gone and will never see their beautiful child. Abd Allah: such a beautiful man was he and she will never find another like him. His brother, al-Harith, had brought the bad news: Abd Allah, Aminah's beloved husband, had fallen sick in Yathrib on his return voyage from Syria with the merchant caravan, a thousand curses on the plague that stole him from her. And he will never see their child.

Aminah sobs hysterically while her cousin and aunt try to console her. It isn't fair, her child, although born into two great families, from the chiefs of two tribes, the Quraysh and the Zuhrah, he will now live a poor life. She has nothing in the way of riches to offer him. Although her uncle will take care of her, he has his own heavy children, and grandchildren to look after.

She will entrust her child to one of the desert tribes, perhaps the Banu Sa'd ibn Bakr. They might take her child to be raised properly in the desert. They can teach it survival, teach it the beauty of speech and poetry as only the desert nomads can. In the desert the child will be safe from the many plagues that come into caravan stops. Cities are no place for babies and young children. Again the pain shakes her entire body. Her breath feels hotter than the midday air. Her entire body spasms and she feels that she will burst open like some ripe piece of fruit. And with great relief she finds that indeed she does. With the anguish and agony of childbirth over, she falls back and smiles. Aminah's cousin, Halah, soon to give birth also, clears the baby's breathing passage and wipes him down with a piece of clean cloth for just such occasions, and hands him over to the anxious mother.

Aminah looks at her newborn baby. He has intelligence in his eyes like no baby she has ever seen. She had felt a strong light within her growing with every day. That light she now sees in his eyes and innocent expression. He is truly his father's son, beautiful in every way. Again she cries, mourning the loss of her husband, joyful at the birth of her child. Life is confusing and chaotic. May Allah protect this little one and keep him safe from the wicked world, may peace be upon him.

The goats are cavorting in the hills again and their frolicsome dances have always amused and soothed Muhammad, now a bright young man full of promise. This year will be beautiful and the goats will give much milk. The beauty of the Arabian hills fills him with a grand sense of purpose, ill defined but grand nonetheless. The fresh desert air, untainted by the town's filth, the slight refreshing breeze, the occasional cloud floating by overhead, all these things and more fill him with awe and wonder. What else could it be other than the spirit of God? Allah!

Now a young man of twelve, he craves the company of a girl or woman more than anything else. In the beauty of women is proof of God's love for man. Some of the boys, not having means enough for a wife, no real property of their own, have occasionally stolen into the hills with sheep or goats. Muhammad, although poor, has not the stomach for such vulgarities, surely it is an act against God! Muhammad is happy to be tending the flocks, anything to help the clan and earn his keep. And sometimes it is nice to be alone, to get a moment's peace.

In the sparse morning clouds above, blowing in from the Red Sea, he sees the face of his dear departed grandfather and guardian, Abd al Muttalib, floating lazily by, a reminder that Allah is everywhere, and only Allah is permanent. His grandfather had died a few years ago, and is now resting in Heaven. All people and animals live and die. Muhammad's father, Abd Allah, now with God in Heaven, died before Muhammad was even born. His mother, Aminah, had entrusted him to the care of neighboring desert wanderers, to teach him the ways of the desert. But they had returned him to her when he was only two years old, probably because she had little to offer them in return. And he had only known her a few years before she also was taken by the mighty hand of Allah. She had fallen sick on their return trip from the oasis of Yathrib when they had gone to see relatives. It almost seems as if Yathrib is a cursed town, both his parents had died when returning from there. He shudders to think of it. But people die all the time, this world has no place for such silly superstitions.

As the clouds float by, slowly disappearing in the early morning sunlight, he sees that there will be no rain today. He was hoping for the life bringing nectar to fall from heaven, but it seems as though it will not happen today. Such is the will of Allah. He pokes at the scant remains of the carcass of a dead hare with his long stick. Seems this poor creature was not fast enough to escape the fox that caught it. The tracks in the sand tell the tale.

The only permanence on earth's change. Just as he has changed from a boy into a strong young man almost overnight, just as his parents and grandfather had died and gone to Heaven, just as the clouds fade and change shapes, just as the hare had been eaten by the fox, all things change. The only permanence at all is in Allah, in whom Muhammad believes with all his heart and soul. To not believe in Allah is to believe that life is futile.

And Allah loves his children, the children of Adam. It is evident in the Ka'bah, the first house of worship given by Allah to Isma'il and his mother, Hagar. He had also given them the well Zamzam. Allah is mighty, Allah is generous, and Allah is mysterious. Can it be said that Allah is even mystery itself? His glorious presence surrounds the children of Adam, unites them, even if they accept Allah or not. Without Him the world would not be.

Of all the infinite ways that words can be placed together, only this much is certain. That only Allah is eternal, and that only through Allah can one attain peace, happiness, and love. Without love, life is futile. And what is Allah if not love?

A day of happiness like this he has never known, nor has his wife, Khadija. Would it not be enough that Allah has bestowed upon him the love of this beautiful woman of means? But now Allah has blessed them with this little bundle of love! Salma, Safiyyah's servant, helps to clean up the awful mess and stench, truly as though the Red Sea is concentrated into a drop of water, but Muhammad is no innocent dupe; he knows these are the smells of life. He does his best to smile and not hold his nose and retch while he strokes the back of his baby boy's head, the back of baby Qusim's head. He finds it amazing the way that life starts so fragile. More than anything else, it is a parent's love that makes a baby grow. He knows this as surely as he knows that all people are the children of Allah.

Baby Qusim drinks his fill of milk from Khadija's ample bosom and falls fast asleep, and eventually so does Muhammad's beautiful wife. Of course the next step of fatherhood's pride, Muhammad makes the rounds, touring the town with his boy wrapped up tightly in a blanket, proclaiming to all his kin and the entire Quraysh, "Look what Allah has bestowed upon me! A beautiful boy." Muhammad's uncle and aunt, Abu Talib and Fatimah, are among the first to see. Women and girls flock to see the newborn, as they always do. They ogle and smile and oooh and aahhh. Barrah and Atikah trade off cradling the new babe in their arms. Ja'far and Aqil give Muhammad a congratulatory pat on the back, hug, and blessings, as do people from all over Becca.

Muhammad lastly carries Qusim to the Ka'bah, to the house of Allah, though it is contaminated with many false idols of many different faiths. He makes the rounds seven times, as all his ancestors had done before him, and he enters into the Ka'bah with his baby, to give thanks to almighty Allah for this blessing and to pray for his well-being.

A day of sadness like this he has never known. He weeps a river of tears, shaking uncontrollably with grief, all while trying to remain calm and strong to comfort his dear wife, Muhammad, who had come to be called Abu'l-Qusim, the father of Qusim, over the last two years, can hardly bear this burden of woe. His little one has been taken from him, fallen ill and succumbed to death. As they lay his little body into the ground, wrapped in cloth and prepared for the grave, Muhammad trembles yet again. He and Khadija take some comfort in the health of their baby daughters, Zaynab and Raqayyah.

Fear not, he cries to his wife, for Qusim is pleasing to Allah, and He has called our boy to Heaven, and surely he is well cared for by all the angels there.

A stubborn he is, this Muhammad, his life riddled with grief and hardship. Yet in spite of it all, his outlook remains positive. No doubt the love of his kinfolk sees him through and keeps him strong despite all the stumbling blocks you've placed in his way. Without that little thing,



there is no way that any of them, no matter how strong their will could ever remain as loyal to their faith as he has. Certainly there will be further tests, you aren't finished with him by a long shot but soon, very soon all his efforts will yield reward - a reward that only 3 others have ever enjoyed - in time you will give him a message from God, from Allah - from You!

Time passes as time always does. You could easily transcend time and space leaving these creatures to fend for themselves. So tempting. No doubt at the rate they are learning, they will soon ruin their planet and their race with advances in technology as happens to a most every planet with semi-intelligent life. They will grow weak in body and mind and spirit. Of course there really isn't such a thing, but the belief helps them to carry on with the daily grind. You could easily leave all this behind, but no, something within you won't allow you to leave. If only you could know what it is that is holding you back.

This man, Muhammad, so full of wisdom and patience you have chosen well. He endures many of life's hardships, yet never once denies his faith in you. He calls you the Creator of the Heavens and Earth, which is not entirely true but he doesn't need to know that. Perhaps you are part of a Higher Power and have been sent here to watch, to inspire this race of worms to become as you, to become Gods. Perhaps then with your mission completed you will be allowed to return to the universe from where you came. This is all only a guess, a hope. And what then of this universe? Will you miss it when you are gone this prison of yours? Is all this just a fantasy just as the humans and other semi-intelligent races dream of going to Heaven? Pause for a chuckle. Anyway.

Muhammad, known frequently as al Amin, the reliable, the trustworthy grows older and wiser by the day. When the time is right he sees that his eldest daughters are married to good men. Fate (not you - you don't create everything) blesses him with 2 adopted sons, Zayd and Ali. He continues to manage his wife's riches (now equally his), mostly rather goods, and cloth from Syria, occasionally raisins, dates, coffee and/or his favorite incense.

However, he yearns for more out of life, he searches for answers to life's many questions. He sits and contemplates, meditating on such things in the cave of Jabal al-nur. In you, his faith is absolute and this is good. Faith in a common belief binds people together, unites them in their goals. And only through this blind belief in the intangible, illogical though it be can they ever achieve the unity, the Oneness, they will need before they become as you are.

Strong faith is only rooted in ritual. Almost every day, weather and circumstances permitting, he comes to the cave to sit and meditate, if only for a short while. Almost every day he visits the Ka'bah, searching his soul for what he knows to be good and true.

Faith, purely illogical though it is, is what will bring the humans to you. Now then, you could very easily show yourself to them but then what would they have to work and strive for? They must sharpen and exercise their minds and their wills. You cannot make it easy for them. Only through such practices will they eventually be led to you, to the embodiment of pure logical understanding of all that is.

Unlike so many others, this Muhammad shows great intelligence combined with great faith. And unlike so many others, indeed unlike almost all others on earth, his faith is about to be rewarded with the richest reward you can offer, an answer.

The cave of Hira at the Mountain of Light, Jabal al-nur, is cool and refreshing, a perfect escape from the desert heat. And a perfect place for devotions to God during the month of Ramadan. Muhammad vells into the opening, making sure that it is unoccupied by man or beast. He throws a handful of stones into the mouth of the cave, keeping his bow drawn in case a wild animal seeking shelter therein charges out and attacks, although animals seldom enter because of the strong scent of man. And all is quiet. He removes a flint and piece of iron scrap to grind a

small lantern he'd brought with him. A few minutes are needed to adjust his eyes from the bright desert sunlight to the almost total darkness of the cave. He spreads a blanket on the cave floor, removes his sandals, shakes the sand from his toes, and sits himself down toward the back of the cave for a several day fast, prayer, and meditation, keeping his bow, quiver of arrows, and short sword close at hand.

Just before nightfall he lights a small fire at the mouth of the cave, just to keep animals at bay. In the dark cave he knows exactly where his sword, bow, and arrows are without even seeing them. He puts out his hand to touch them, just to make certain, a warrior should always have his weapons ready and close at hand.

Muhammad keeps vigil for a few hours longer, his thoughts on Heaven, his ears and eyes trained on the cave entrance. Eventually sleep overtakes him and he falls into a fitful slumber. His dreams are haunted with visions of the ground ripping open and a dark liquid demon pouring forth to claim the world, spreading its stench over everything he knows and beyond: Iraq, Arabia, Syria, Egypt, even Rome and the Far East—all controlled by this all-consuming demon that will originate from the ground beneath his feet. He sees the children of Isaac and Isma'il (the Jews and Arabs), the Romans and blacks, the reds from far away lands, those of white hair like sand, all killing each other with magic bows that loose a hundred arrows in the beat of a heart. And arrows that burst forth with fire hotter than a blacksmith's forge, hotter than a potter's kiln, fire that can destroy a small hill or kill an army of a hundred men! All to serve this dark demon, this pure black, flowing evil without thoughts or feelings. It sends men on the backs of silver devils up into the sky, not to battle against the angels of God, of Allah, but to fight and kill each other. And all these foolish men will claim to do it all in the name of God.

He awakes with a jump and grabs for his sword, ready to lash out at the slightest noise, yet he hears nothing in the cave with him. 'Who's there?' Speak. He knows he is alone and feels slightly foolish, like a child. He sets his sword down and covers himself with his thick blanket, and tries to understand the meaning of this dream. He knows he's seen the future, earth will be left to the devils and false gods after all the true believers have been called to Heaven. If only he could stop the devils!

The morning comes quickly in the desert and usually it is the bright sun that awakens him. Yet in the far recesses of the cave, the sun is slow to penetrate. And so he awakens a bit later than he normally would. Muhammad is refreshed despite his troubled dreams. He takes up his bow, arrows, and sword to have a look outside, stretch, and warm his limbs in the sunlight. He blinks his eyes and it is a beautiful day. He opens wide his nostrils to breathe in deep the smells of thyme and hardy that grow in the hills around Becca. 'What a gorgeous day this is!' It fills him with happiness, as does the much needed solitude away from the bustle of life in the busy caravan stop of Becca, his home. He removes some raisins and dates from his small satchel and snacks on them, picks his teeth, and rinses his mouth with water to dispel the morning funk that grows in the night.

Early awake now, he returns to the cave and his blanket, where he sits in meditation. In a small censer he ignites a bit of myrrh to drive away the musty cave odor. The aroma is light, warm, and refreshing. He quietly utters several devotional prayers for the well being of his family, his friends, relatives, and even the whole city of Becca. He gives thanks for all that he has, and asks no more. He thanks God for showing Isma'il where to build the Ka'bah and giving him the well of Zamzam. He prays to God to watch over his dear departed relatives in Heaven.

Then Muhammad sits quietly, reflecting on the beauty and wonder of all God's creations. This takes his mind and stretches it outward across the desert and mountains, out across the sky and the sea. An overwhelming peace descends upon him and in this holy state he remains fixed for many untold hours.

Suddenly he senses a presence in the cave with him. He reaches for his sword, but it is gone.' He searches all around him, yet it is nowhere to be seen.' He panics and some strange spirit enters his mind and probes his every thought, knows his every desire, and leaves him convulsing and drooling on the cave floor. Yet he quickly sits upright, as though nothing had happened. From his mouth he wipes away the saliva and stares at the most amazing and frightening thing he's ever seen. A man of astounding perfection, the likes of which he has never witnessed, walks towards him, yet floats on the air.

'Muhammad, I am the angel you call Gabriel. And I have a task for you, Muhammad.' The spirit speaks in a thundering voice without speaking. The sounds echo off the mountains, yet no sound is made at all.

Muhammad puts his trembling face to the floor, more out of fright than piety.

"Do not be afraid, Muhammad." With only one finger the spirit gently forces his face to look at his. "Recite, Muhammad."

Muhammad shakes his head in answer, unable to speak. It is not that he's disobeying the spirit, it is just that Muhammad has always been a man of action, not words. Muhammad has never been a poet, nor can he even read and write. Surely the angels have chosen the wrong man for such a daunting task! To recite the words of angels! Him? "Muhammad!"

The spirit takes hold of his mind yet again, and it is totally different from what Muhammad would have ever have expected. He would expect love and kindness, but there is raw power and logic enough to overcome any obstacle. Surely the angel Gabriel is the fiercest warrior of God.

Again the angel commands, "Recite, Muhammad."

But the words are not there. Muhammad knows nothing of recitation, nor does he know of what the angel would have him recite.

Again the angel shakes him to his core and this time he is stricken unconscious. When he finally awakens he can see that nightfall will be soon. He was hoping that he'd fallen into a bad dream, but there is the angel yet again.

'Now Muhammad, this time you will recite.

He finds his head filled with words that are not his own, glorious and beautiful words, that he knows have been placed there by God, by Allah Himself. These words, he knows, are in primitive terms that he can understand and not the true language of angels, but the words are as perfect as the human tongue will ever speak, and the human ear will ever hear.

*'Recite in the name of your Lord who created.'*

*He created man from a clot of blood.*

*Recite, and your Lord is the Most Bountiful.*

*He who has taught by the pen.*

*taught man what he knew not."*

With great sadness does Muhammad look backwards toward Becca, his birthplace and hometown. He'd rather not be leaving at all, but he really has no choice in the matter. If he stays he will be killed by people who were once his friends and allies. With even greater sadness is the fact that they won't listen to him—they don't believe his words, words of the Messenger of God.

If only they'd listen to him and hear the goodness with which he speaks. He only wishes the best for his family, relatives, and friends. He only wishes with all his heart to save their eternal souls from everlasting fire. Perhaps they will come around yet. He can only hope and pray. But it must be their choice that brings them to Islam, to truth, and steer them away from their pagan idols. Using Muhammad's love for his kinfolk, Satan almost tempted Muhammad to include their gods in the Qu'ran, the holy collection of surahs (revelations), but Allah had shown him the true path and from that he will not stray.

It has been about twelve years since the first revelation in the cave. In the beginning he was reluctant, knowing full well the treatment he'd have at the hands of the elder members of the Quraysh, the leading tribe of Mecca. At first it was only his wife, Khadija (now with Allah), Ali, Abu Bakr, and a few others. He has come such a long way, gained so many followers, but has such a long way to go yet. At first they mocked him, even tortured his followers into repenting their Islam, tortured them near to madness with fire, whips, and crushing boulders. However, thankfully those things were quickly put to an end. And despite all that, or maybe because of it, in time his followers grew in number so that now it would take him some effort to count them all by name.

Sneaking away like a common thief in the night, he now must leave his home and because the tribe elders feel threatened, as well they should, idolaters that they are. He spurs Qaswa, his newly acquired camel, the sooner he puts Mecca behind him the less painful will be. A muscular beauty she is, this camel, that his closest friend, Abu Bakr, had sold to him. He would race her against any camel on Earth. This is one camel, he thinks, he would never sacrifice. Well, not unless, of course, Allah demanded it for some reason.

Muhammad can hardly wait to be far away from the town and hidden in the caves of Mt. Thaur to the south of Mecca. For right now he, Abu Bakr, and Abu Bakr's son, Abd Allah, must hold their voices down, the Quraysh, curse them, have put a bounty on Muhammad's head. However, Muhammad is quite confident that God will lead him to safety as He always does. Yes, God will see him safely to Yathrib, where many more of his followers anxiously await his arrival.

In the town of Yathrib he has been promised protection. Perhaps there he will find followers that he can instruct in the ways of Islam. God will show him the way.

Yes, indeed, this Muhammad is a feisty fellow. No one can sway his mind, not even, chuckle Satan. He has absolute faith in everything that you tell him, as well he should. He even has absolute faith in his own visions now. By entering his mind you have affected him greatly and now he sees and hears angels where there are none. No matter, his followers will put his prophetic visions in high esteem whenever they happen to be correct, and dismiss them when they are not. Such is the way of the religious. He certainly is a charismatic fellow. He could inspire armies to take over the world. Perhaps, perhaps. But in the meantime, faith, pure faith, only grows stronger with trials and tribulations. And have you got those in store for him?

Muhammad looks northward over his homeland and it grieves him sorely that his kinsfolk have been so stubborn. Of all the people in all of Arabia, doesn't it just figure that they would be amongs the last to embrace Islam? Stubborn asses. Ten years ago it was that he was driven out like an adulterer from Mecca. Now he has come to reclaim the honor that he had lost. But much more importantly, the honor that Allah has lost. The idolaters will change their ways or, by God, they will pray elsewhere besides Mecca.

In God all things are united. Muhammad had settled in Yathrib and it was there that the constantly fighting tribes of Aws and Khazraj were united into a whole. Together they successfully raided many caravans from Mecca, they had repelled the army of Mecca when they attacked at Badr. He still remembers that day fondly, especially the death of Abu Jahl, that nagging thorn in his side who caused him no end of trouble. Only through the unity of God could all this have been accomplished. And now Yathrib is called Medina, The City, because it has become so prosperous. And the treacherous Jews of the Banu Qaynuqa had been repelled as well. The second battle with the Quraysh at Uhud could have been better, but considering the overwhelming odds against the Muslims, they didn't fare too badly at all.

All these battles and more echo in the halls of his mind. Yet this one today, he knows, will be the greatest. With ten thousand soldiers at his command, there is little the Quraysh can do

against him. A few of their men will fight to protect their idols, but most will see the right of Allah.

When the town is secured and all the fighting stopped he then goes to his tent, colored red as is his long cloak. He lovingly greets several of his wives (the rest are home in Yathrib) and then settles a minor disagreement among his commanders as to what to do with the captive enemy soldiers. Out of sympathy and respect for his followers, many of whom have family ties with the Quraysh (himself included), he spares the enemy soldiers' lives. And many of them willingly profess a allegiance to him and to God: "La ilaha illa Allah, Muhammad ar rasul Allah." There is no God but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God.

It is imperative that he prepare himself properly before performing his next task. He performs the ablutions and eight cycles of prayer before he is to visit the House of God, the Ka'bah.

Mounted atop his camel, Qaswa, wearing full armor and carrying his sword he parades through the town he knows so well. Little has changed. He thinks back to his childhood and he misses Becca, misses his hometown more than anything else. For here in Becca is the House of God, and towards it he rides. He also misses strolling around the hills Shamah and Taif. He misses drinking at the well of Majannah where he would sometimes rest after returning from long voyages. When he sees the Ka'bah he stops his camel and bows his head in praise of Allah. Straight to the southeast corner of the Ka'bah he rides and respectfully touches the black stone with his walking staff. "Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar." God is great, he repeats three times. Others repeat these words and a lot of Becca vibrates with the reverent chant of the Muslims while the nonbelievers are huddled together in their houses, in fear and awe of the mighty army. He then performs the seven rounds of the Ka'bah, the Holy House. And only one task remains.

Surrounding the Ka'bah in a wide circle are three hundred sixty stone sculptures, idols to which people pray. Inside the Ka'bah are various unholy paintings and images. The truth has come and the false has vanished. Truly the false is ever a vanisher. All of the sculptures the Prophet knocks to the ground and the sculptures and paintings he orders destroyed, with the exception of two paintings, one of Ibrahim, the father of Isaac and Isma'il, and the other of baby Yeshua and his mother, the Blessed Virgin Maryam.

A strange sensation overtakes him, unlike any he has ever felt before when he looks at the painting of baby Yeshua. Somehow he feels connected to Yeshua in some sense. It is totally unlike the revelations he has from Allah. Muhammad decides to contemplate this later, but he tells no one. For now he has other matters to which to he must attend. He hopes that he can make quick work of the upcoming battle he has planned with Hunayn and, God willing, that goes well, the besiegement of Ta'if. He already misses A'isha, his favorite of his many wives, she's beautiful, young, and playful. His time with her is as refreshing as a cool rain in the hot seasons. Her kisses are as sweet as . . . He tears himself out of that mode of thought. He must focus on the battle.

Seems Muhammad is full of surprises. His way of uniting the Arabs is quick and efficient. And it is no coincidence that the more advanced societies embrace the concept of God while the primitive cultures tend to always pray to stone, dolls, or trees or the 4 winds or whatever nonsense that they choose to be a power above themselves. Of course, for some strange reason, they always seem to ascribe to you human attributes. "Made in Your image." Ha! They wish. Where do they come up with these notions? At least Cuatama never claimed to know anything about you except that through his ways all can be united and achieve enlightenment. Muhammad is so much more aggressive. But he does get the job done much more quickly, with all the practicality of a true son of the desert. We'll go on for him then? The humans will die anyway. So what if a few or a few billion are killed in your holy name. Speaking of killing, it's almost time for you to do away with Muhammad. He has served his purpose well.

A'isha and Abu Bakr dig as quietly as possible, not enjoying this task at all. It is bad

enough digging up one corpse but two! They had wrapped the corpse to appear to be that of Muhammad's. If he's ever unearthed, none will know the difference. This chore is disgusting,' thinks A'isha. And had her husband, the Prophet, not requested it, she would never have done it.

One of his final visions, he confided in her and Abu Bakr, his closest friend, was that his corpse would be worshipped much the same way that the stone idols of Becca and other pagan towns were worshipped. Muhammad knew it was a silly request: a corpse is a corpse, is a corpse after all. But he just didn't like the idea of *his* corpse being worshipped and prayed over.

Abu Bakr, now the high caliph, had commanded the city guards to keep a close watch on the other end of town, saying that he suspected something was afoot, but he couldn't say what, when, or where exactly. He merely said that he had an informant. And who were the guards to argue with the Prophet's closest friend? So late at night he and A'isha carried into town the body of some unknown pauper from the graveyard. Luckily it was a male when they unearthed it. Had it been a female they would have had to dig up another.

Now is time for the old switch-a-roo. They dig deeper and deeper into the ground where the Prophet is buried—in A'isha's own house, where the Prophet had died. And soon they find where the earth is hollow, where the Prophet's body will have decomposed after many months. The two conspirators expect to smell the stench of rotting flesh, as they would from any human, yet there's none. They know how the Prophet detested foul odors, so perhaps God has decreed that Muhammad's body shall not reek. The ground gives way and caves in, yet there is nothing there. They keep digging, yet only find a hollow cavity, no corpse at all!

After panting from the effort of all the digging and the panic of discovering that the body of God's Messenger has been stolen, they quickly bury the unknown corpse—before that, however, they first dig a little deeper into Muhammad's grave, just to be certain that his body is not there. And, unbelievably, it isn't. They strongly suspect that someone has robbed them of the Prophet's body, some undoubtedly hideous and evil person.

Abu Bakr and A'isha cleanse themselves of the dirt, grime, and filth of grave digging, which they never would have done had not Muhammad requested it. She doesn't know which was worse: all the digging and hard work, the sneaking around like a thief in the night, or the filth of the job. Or finding that her lover's grave has been desecrated. But who would do such a thing? Who, by God, would want to steal Muhammad's body?

Early in the morning, next to the couch on which Muhammad had died and was then buried beneath, A'isha notices something that failed to catch her eye until now. On the small table sits a tiny little cup that was Muhammad's favorite. It was the one from which he would drink his coffee that she prepared for him. The young girl holds it to her cheek and a tear falls into it.

Perhaps his followers will see the truth of your words. Perhaps they won't. The daily ritual of prayer, required of every Muslim, will strengthen their faith. So many truths you've imparted to them, and to others. Surely they will now see that there are many paths leading to the same point. Through peace and unification the human race will undoubtedly become truly great.

And of all your words in the Qu'ran, you must say that these are your favorite: *For each people (region) We (God and His angels) have appointed a law and a path, and if God had wished He could have made you one people, so you with one another in great works. Unto God ye will all be brought back and He will then inform you of those things in wherein you differed.*

Of course you won't really pause for a bit of laughter—bring them back—not until they have achieved the same state of consciousness that you have. And that may not be for many 10's and 10's of years. Well, at least they're making progress now. At least now they are headed in the right direction toward a more unified and harmonious state of mind and existence. And with the truth of God, what more could they possibly need?

Mesozoic hydrocarbon  
combustion push  
explode shaft turn  
axle vacuumed  
rubber radial  
rotate moving  
forward in a  
reference frame all  
our own a billion  
at once exhausting  
oxidized carbon  
floating away  
unseen on wings  
of diffusion  
confusion eating  
a hole in the  
atmosphere radiation  
crackle down burn  
freeze mutate  
pulling us to sleep

This is not art  
there is no such thing  
This is reality

Hair dye, bright  
red Dogs on a  
cush Little boys  
on skateboards.  
It doesn't matter



Richard Arm always wakes with the precision of a nuclear clock, which is appropriate in every respect—appropriate for a military man, appropriate for a nuclear technician. Alarm clocks are for people who don't want to wake up. Clanging bells shattering slumber like porcelain dolls he can do without. He jumps out of bed and then makes it, tucking the covers, rubber band tight. He makes coffee and breakfast, turns the heater up a bit, and listens to the news on the radio. An advertisement comes on for a brand new adventure show of a nuclear irradiated superhero with god-like powers. It only

A skyscraper of papers towers over Richard's small kitchen table. Up, up, and away. He wonders if he'll ever make it, have what it takes to delve into the mysteries of the universe. So little time, so little time. He reads partway through one of these papers, before understanding that he doesn't understand the math, wishing he could just plug the information he needs into his brain somehow, but knowing that only hard work can accomplish that. Hard work had brought him up out of the drudgery of farm life. They said he'd never make it. Stupid, ignorant hillbillies and bucks, all of them. Hard work had brought him where he was today, working the cutting edge of nuclear technology.

The cutting edge of the razor is a little dull, so he runs it over the leather strap before shaving off his morning whiskers. He showers and remembers, as he does so often, the gentle face of Einstein that he saw as a very young boy when he and his father went on a trip. Those eyes and crazy hair—the old man looked like a wild animal in a suit, an educated bushman. Richard remembers it fondly, although he wouldn't understand until he was older, looking from afar at the magic in Albert Einstein's eyes, eyes that can see past (or into) the fabric of existence.

Post-shower R and R before donning uniform. Richard digs into his modern physics college textbook, burrowing up on statistical mechanics. There's a training session this afternoon rehearsing the operating parameters of the new condenser on the SL one (Stationary Low Power Reactor), fairly simple material, really. Simple compared to the math he's working on. The proofs are horrendous and may not even be possible. Prove from one and zero the existence of every other number, including the concept of infinity, which is not a number, merely a concept.

Merely, the books say. There is no merely about it. But this means laying out the rules (operations) of math before the numbers. Or do the numbers determine the rules? Or vice versa? Or do rules and numbers exist independent of each other? Are their existences relative to each other, as are space, time and velocity, mass and energy? More reading.

Richard's addiction is quiet time. For some it's cigarettes, acohol, drugs, or loose women. But unlike most twenty-five-year-old men, his desire to sit and think and solve is unquenchable. He hopes once the reactor's proven worthy—as he knows it will be—that he'll be assigned to operate the plant on the DEW line (Defense early warning) for detecting incoming ICBMs with only a small crew of less than ten men. Alaska. Maybe northern Canada. A U.S. Navy Lieutenant electrician's mate working an SLPBWR plant on the DEW line to detect ICBMs from the USSR. It amounts to lots of free time to read and think. The perfect job. But that may be a year or two from now. Good. Lots of time to stock up on just the right books and papers.

He reviews in his mind and on paper exactly what he needs to do this evening, on his four-to-midnight shift. Perform a water pump down, reassemble the control rods, install the plugs, put the shield blocks in place, leave the top shield off. Then connect rod drive motors. But all that will be done by the mech techs. Then he'll have to electrically zero the control rod balances while the others help with the mechanical aspects. Then they'll have to run through the startup checklists and perform cold rod drops, check for leaks, replace top shield plug, perform hot rod drop tests, and a startup to three megawatts. Busy night. Damn it all.

Better than Navy training anyway where there was never a free minute where his name had become Seaman Dick Arm or Arm Dick which he supposes is better than Seaman Pinky Dick. Thank God he's working with a better class of people now. Well it's to be expected at the National Reactor Testing Station. Can't let morons run nuclear power stations. Rich McCarthy and John Burns the men he shares his shift with are decent serious folk even if they're Army. In fact he thinks some of the supervisors engineers and officers are slightly more crude than the enlisted men. Life is a range. All the way from a US Navy E one to being a nuclear electrician in just a few years of training. And Fort Belvoir was surprisingly easy for him. Only the best and brightest make it through the academic nuclear training courses.

If only his high school had been better he might have gone to college. But did he have the discipline then? Would he have wasted his precious time chasing girls drinking and taking classes? When his second term in the Navy is up then he'll go to college. Math? Physics? Both? Decisions, decisions. Forget the past. Focus on the future.

Just when he gets settled down and comfortable ready to do a bit of serious reading the phone rings. Typical. Luckily it's not the plant supervisor but the bookstore in Idaho Falls. They just received that number theory book that he'd ordered a month back or so. That was fast. Great! A good excuse to go into town for the day. He gets permission from the Combustion Tech Supervisor and commanding officer on duty. He grabs a few papers to take with him so he can have something to read at the restaurant he'll go to for lunch.

Richard's fifty-seven Impala warms up quickly while he scrapes frost off the windows. Brrrr! It's cold. He talks to himself. At least there's no ice on the roads. The car's big engine quickly makes the interior into a nice little toaster oven. A nice quiet drive is just what he needs on a boring Tuesday. Sometimes the forest scenery is overwhelming and he almost just a moment wishes he were a park ranger. The Impala eats up US highway twenty like it was a long pasta noodle. Cold weather always tends to make him hungry. damn it.

He chats with the girl at the bookstore not the general librarian type a real looker. And brains too! She seems to at least have a good knowledge of science books if not a superb knowledge of science. Richard can't help but get her name and phone number. Autumn easy name to remember. She's only nineteen and not long out of high school but she doesn't act it. He makes a mental note to call her tomorrow and ask her out to dinner Friday. He decides to cut his town trip short and just grab a burger when he can get back to his studies.

Most of the way back he thinks of her. He also thinks of the special theory of relativity and the twin paradox. He wonders if it could be related to the uncertainty principle. A long shot but who knows. Richard's main worry however is getting the reactor back in good shape. Granted he's only a nuclear technician not an engineer but he still has his reasons for wanting to make that damn SL one reactor pass all the tests it needs to. Damn though if the drive rods haven't been sticking like mad. And the coolant water's got a few kinds of nasty gunk in it. Oh well soon they'll replace the entire core. A good thing too those boron strips are in bad shape. All these problems should be fairly easy to fix. Well while the reactor's shut down it's fairly safe. And boiling water reactors so he was told over and over again. Don't blow up. Although the water isn't boiling because the reactor's shut down with the control rods fully inserted. And the cold weather might increase the reactivity. But all in all it's safer he supposes than many other jobs the Navy has to offer.

Richard daydreams of a bright shining future of being remembered as one of the first men who brought unlimited energy to the all the peoples of the world. He visualizes a world without hunger or war. With the fire of the sun and stars at their fingertips what more could the human race possibly need?

## *Sanguine Tide*

*The blade whistles a sweet tune through the cold air and gracefully slides across your exposed throat as though it were a figure skater gliding on a frozen pond at night, shining in the light from the gas lamps and the twinkling stars overhead. Your flesh is parted and opens up with a generous offer, giving your body's precious fluids to the undernourished ground below. Your blood, now free to roam where it will laughs as it flows into your lungs and runs out over your feet and onto the grass underneath dancing with joy to show off its beautiful scarlet color to the moon above. Your hands are warmed by the heat your blood provides as you hold them to your neck and uselessly try to prevent the flow. Such beauty as this cannot be imprisoned forever. You stagger and find as your head goes light that it is not entirely different from being drunk. The ground rushes up to meet you like an old friend and is delighted that it will have company this evening. As you close your eyes the peaceful bliss of an ocean's sandy beach on a warm clear day engulfs you and a salty breeze blows across your mind. The darkness sets in and your lips curl in a wry smile as you suddenly stare out across infinity's ocean under a bright sky, grab your board, and run for the waves. Surf's up!*

Tiffany awakes, cozy as can be under several layers of fuzzy blankets, to the smells of French toast and bacon and coffee and hot chocolate and who knows what else. The cocoa is for her and her little brother Eric. The coffee, yuck, for her parents. Crown ups.

She yawns, stretches, and kicks the covers around for a bit. Her cat Tigger, which she had gotten for Christmas two years ago, swats at her little feet as though pretending they're fat little mice. She giggles at this just like every morning, and she wonders what she'll get for Christmas this year. She wants another cat, a girl kitty cat, so that Tigger and the new cat can get married and have lots of little kittens. She already owns lots of toys and games, so she doesn't really need any more. Every year she gives lots of new ones to boys and girls whose parents can't afford to buy them any. Her mother and father help with this, of course. And every year her father gives away lots of money to people in other countries who have no food. She can hardly imagine such a thing! And it gives her a slight tremor. She has all the clothes she could possibly want, all from the best shops in the mall, and some even from Europe when she and her family went on vacation last summer. She knows what she really wants for Christmas. She crawls out of bed and wraps herself in her favorite robe before going downstairs for breakfast. She stares in her large walk-in closet and closes her eyes, imagining what it would be like to open her eyes, dreaming of what it would be like to open her closet and see her dream waiting for her, for her. But she dares not ask for it. She doesn't want to be like her greedy older cousin who asked for a Porsche last year, and got it.

Eric's coming out of the bathroom, sleep still in his eyes and he forgot to flush again. He sheepishly apologizes and returns for a second to make it right. At least he's getting better, Tiffany thinks. She remembers a few years ago teaching him to use the toilet and hold it in 'til he gets there. Thank God she doesn't have to worry about *that* anymore! What a chore! Life's rough enough as it is.

She combs her beautiful long blonde hair in the mirror, gargles some mouthwash to get rid of that nasty morning breath, and washes the nighttime dirt and oil buildup off of her face with some cleansing pads. She'll worry about applying make-up later. Her mother and father grin to see her Winnie the Pooh slippers bobbing up and down as she descends the staircase. The morning greeting ritual commences with big loving kisses. Eric comes down and her mother pecks him on the cheek and her father gives him a big manly bear hug.

Tigger comes running in through the cat flap in the kitchen door, having finished his morning business outside, and shakes the snow off his fur. He meows loudly for his breakfast and Tiffany must obey, after a quick sip of hot cocoa to give her a jumpstart.

Tiffany's mother reminds her and her brother of the busy day ahead, like they'd forget. Today they go to see Santa Claus! Although Tiffany's a bit old for that now, it makes her mother happy, so she'll go to sit on the fat man's knee even though she knows he's not real. She does it more for the family and especially her little brother.

Her mother asks her if she'll ask Santa for a new Barbie doll or Barbie clothes. Tiffany knows this means her mother already got them, so she tries not to give away her disappointment, she's getting too old for that kid stuff. But she dares not say what she really wants.

Eric rattles off a long and rehearsed list of remote control cars and toy tool kits and a bubble blowing machine and a new Super Soaker squirt gun and a giant stuffed Winnie the Pooh and a go cart and a telescope to watch the moon and planets and...on and on. Tiffany almost feels sorry for Santa, or the man playing Santa. She almost feels guilty asking for more. She has everything she needs. What more could she possibly want?

Michael Garrett awakes in the bottom bunk, his feet sticking out of the tiny little blanket the shelter lets him use into the crisp, chilly air. His duffel bag is his pillow. All it has are a few books, some uncomfortable shoes, and two sets of clothes. He's learned long ago never to own anything people would want to steal. Or would wipe you out, they did steal it.

The morning wake-up alarm is blaring so he stands and neatly folds his blanket as geometrically perfect as he possibly can then bangs on it seven times with the palm of his hand to chase out the demons. Seven is his spirit number. His stunted body argues with him, wanting to stay in bed, but the shelter workers won't allow that. Besides, he wants his oatmeal, coffee, and a shower. The shower is hot and refreshing, but too short. Like a teaser. Like a peck on a cheek from a beautiful woman. Three minutes. Three minutes! the shelter workers yell anxiously to get everyone out of the showers, but ignoring the big vicious perverts in the back stalls trading cigarettes for sex or sometimes just taking it. Michael Garrett is too old, big, and fat, and has a few missing teeth, so the perverts leave him alone. They prefer the smaller, young skinny men.

He bangs on his clean clothes seven times before he puts them on. He treats his shoes in the same manner to chase the demons out. It usually works. The oatmeal is lukewarm, the donuts hard, the coffee bitter and unsweetened, the sugar and creamer have been stolen again.

And he's turned out on the streets with a hundred other wandering, rootless men. The sun is shining, but there is snow and slush on the ground. It's a short walk to the bus stop, but he knows his feet will be soaked in icy water by the time he gets there. Before he leaves the shelter he bangs on it seven times to chase out the demons. He knows it won't work, some demons are just too powerful, but he has to try. At least his long coat is warm and presentable. And his clothes look fairly nice as well. They need to because today is a very important day. In his coat pocket is his most prized possession, his TI thirty-eight scientific calculator. He's going to need it.

Tiffany puts on her favorite waterproof mittens (great for snowballs) and overshoes while her father pulls the four-wheel-drive SUV out of the garage. "Can't take out the Rolls in nasty, icy weather like this. She plays with her brother out in the snow, repairing their snowman, shoveling the drive, throwing snowballs at their father and he doesn't seem to mind too much. Her cat watches them from the living room picture window, looking at them like they're crazy. Can Tigger have forgotten what it's like to be young?"

Finally, after an hour and a half, her mother is dressed and ready and away they go! The shopping mall isn't too far, the drive is short. The SUV handles great on the snow! They park in the valet lot. Even though she's eleven years old now, she still is slightly anxious to see Santa and more anxious to see her little brother, Eric, who he is greedy ecstasy to sit on the lap of the ultimate gift giver and spend his entire heart's desire in just a few minutes. If he can talk that fast. She's heard him practicing and knows how funny this is going to be.

Michael Garrett bangs on the bus seven times to chase out the demons and it works well. He plugs in a dollar thirty-five and gets a transfer ticket and away the bus goes. With the changeover to the uptown bus the trip takes over two hours. The bus finally stops and lets him out by the street near the mall and he can hardly wait, he's got work to do. He may get kicked out of this expensive mall, but he's wearing a nice shirt and khakis. This time of year people give away all kinds of nice clothes to the shelter. He's planned this mall trip for weeks.

He bangs on the mall entrance seven times to chase out the demons, although he supposes it's rude of him to try to chase them out of their own home. Some stylish black hip-hop kids notice this and yell, "You ain't gotta knock, you dumb motherfucker! Ain't nobody gonna let you ugly ass in noways." "Nasty ol' fuckin' hippie ain't got no money!" "Haw haww hawww. . .

He enters through the revolving door because he knows demons are afraid of it and already he feels the eyes on him. He knows he doesn't belong, even despite his decent looking clothes. But still he has important work to do. He turns on his calculator and starts walking, punching the plus, one equals keys for every Santa Claus that he sees. For weeks he's done this, as he does every year—on the streets, the home decorations, the stores, the greeting card shops, the churches, and the shopping malls. He keeps a tab of the Santa Clauses and Jesuses—'or is it Jesi?' No matter, he will show the ratio's fast approaching one to the power of pi with every year—and when it passes that number the demons will overturn the earth! Numbers don't lie!

The line's long and boring, as all lines are. At first it was fun because of the juggling elf but that got old quick. The parents enjoy the elf better than the kids do. Some of the children are crying, others are throwing temper tantrums because *they* want to see Santa *first*. Some are frightened out of their wits. Some can't hold still for the pictures. This year Santa has a red fluffy towel, with white trim over his lap. Smart move, thinks Tiffany.

And finally, they get their turn! Eric runs up to Santa, running past all the elves like he was a quarterback that their father likes to watch on TV, and he jumps into Santa's arms and gives him a big kiss—no heck with manliness. And he says please Santa can I have—Eric rattles off a list of toys and games like he was an auctioneer. On and on and on it goes. The names of one hundred toys spouted out in just under two minutes. The longer it goes the more people laugh and Santa really does shake like a bowl full of jelly. Finally, when it's all over, her little brother sits there panting like a puppy dog on a hot summer's day and Santa's laughing so hard that he has tears in his eyes. Even though she's heard her little brother's routine, she still finds herself doubled over in laughter as well. The crowd of people all clap and it gives the juggling elf a few minutes of rest. Her parents use up an entire roll of film taking pictures of Eric. And the eight-millimeter videotape will be great. When Santa finally stops laughing he just looks at Eric and says, 'I'll try my best. Merry Christmas! Ho ho ho!'

And then it's Tiffany's turn. She smiles coyly and shyly and sits on his knee, knowing this will be the last time she does this—she's starting to grow boobs for Pete's sake. She hopes that none of her friends see her doing this. So she whispers in Santa's ear, 'Look, I know you're not real, but I'll do this.' And she tells him, 'I have everything I need and more, but what I really want's ~ whisper whisper whisper ~'

Santa's jaw drops open. 'You're even more ambitious than your brother.' And Santa whispers back, 'I hope you get it, I really do,' and does his routine, 'Ho ho ho!' Merry Christmas!

She thanks Santa and hops off his lap and walks away, a little sad that Santa isn't real—he should be damn it. A father places his very young and frightened son on Santa's lap, the boy having not the foggiest idea of what he's doing there, thinking maybe perhaps his father intends to give him to this red and white devil as some sort of gift-offering or sacrifice. Children are very intelligent.

'Oh, Santa! I almost forgot.' Tiffany says at the last second before exiting Santa Land. 'I also want a little girl kitty.' She says this loudly so her parents will hear.

'I think maybe I can handle that one,' Santa winks.

Tiffany's mother gives her father a sweet kiss on the cheek, they smile lovingly at each other, and it's obvious that they've already arranged for the new kitty to be delivered.

Several of Tiffany's friends—she has many—see her and wave. They ask if she'd like to join them in shopping, and she asks her father. He says, 'Alright, but stay with your friends and be sure to meet back here by four.' He also gives her the Visa card, telling her not to go over four

hundred dollars and save the receipts.

A toy store manager who witnessed Eric's siting-on-Santa's-lap routine is talking to her parents about using her brother for a TV advertisement. Eric can hardly contain his joy (and he doesn't )—He's going to be a TV star!

No one pays Michael Garrett much attention, even though he's out of place. They just look at him, in his out-of-style clothes and unkempt, long, shaggy beard, hoist their noses up into the air and walk past him as if he's an invisible ghost. Even when he smiles or says hello or Merry Christmas to someone.

There's quite a commotion over by Santa Land, the final Santa Claus that he'll have to count this year. Number twenty-five hundred. People are laughing at the antics of a cute little boy. None of this affects Michael Garrett in the slightest; his attention is focused on the enormous demon lord hovering over the Santa. It pulls on green strings attached to Santa Claus, controlling his every movement, his every word. Santa Claus doesn't really exist, only the demons exist. Michael Garrett blinks his eyes seven times, hoping it will make the demon go away. This merely attracts the demon's attention and it laughs at Michael Garrett's feeble attempt, just as the crowd laughs at the little boy.

Michael Garrett is about to move on when there's yet another commotion over by the Santa Claus. A young boy on Santa's lap is crying loudly, but that isn't the problem. A dark-haired, dark-eyed man is not quite heckling Santa, but asking him questions. The demon looming overhead is angered and calls for its minions of evil.

Chris! Hey Chris! The dark-eyed man speaks loudly but Santa ignores him. **Hey you! Chris Cringle! Santa Claus! I just wanna ask you a quick question!** The elves start to chase him away and a security guard interrupts. But none of this deters the dark-eyed man. **Santa! For the record! I have to know! Do you believe in Jesus?**

The demon lord writhes and screams in agony. The security guards stop pushing the man away and just stare at him in disbelief. Everything's quieted down and all that can be heard are the shops' cash registers beeping away, the little boy crying, and some awful Christmas tune over the mall speakers. For a brief second Santa's green puppet strings are broken and the demon screams his silent protests to whatever dark gods it serves.

After several long seconds Santa Claus says, 'Yes. Yes, of course I believe in Jesus.' A single, lone tear of dark green liquid drips out of the demon lord's left eye. Very quickly normalcy is restored to the shopping mall and the demon lord reattaches the green strings to its Santa Claus puppet.

**'Thank you, Santa! Thank you!** That was all I wanted for Christmas' the man laughs and walks away, obviously more than satisfied and rather pleased with himself.

Michael Garrett could swear he knows this dark-eyed man from somewhere and he has to get a closer look. The man is conservatively dressed and there is nothing about him that seems out of the ordinary—except for those eyes. The demons are afraid of him. He stares not at this world, and not at the demons or their world, but at some distant unfathomable gulfs that Michael Garrett shudders to think about. The security guards usher the dark-eyed man away. As the man passes Michael Garrett by, he winks and says, "You really are wasting your time here, it's inevitable, you know."

It's all very confusing. Michael Garrett's never seen anything like this before and it makes his head swim. He decides to spend his last two dollars—except for his bus fare back to the shelter—and buy a coffee at that expensive-looking coffee shop in the mall. There he can finish his work.

'What'll you have?' the young pretty girl behind the coffee shop counter asks.



Even though he's an old man, Michael Garrett can't help but notice how pretty she is. He stutters and his left eye wanders around uncontrollably though his good right eye is focused on her slightly open blouse and he wishes he could stop himself but he can't and says, 'Co Co Coff'. He can tell the poor girl is frightened of him and he wishes she weren't but he really means no harm.

'Regular coffee?' she asks.

He sees there are several choices and points to the one he wants. 'Ke Ken'.

'Kenyan?' she asks. He grins and nods fervently. He hasn't had real coffee since he can't remember how long ago it was.

'That's two-fifteen,' she tells him carefully handing him the hot coffee.

He pulls out two dollars, but that's all he can afford to spend. He shakes his head in distress and tries to apologize. 'I I I mm'.

'I'm sorry it's two-fifteen,' she speaks to him as though he were a three-year-old, 'and we don't have a smaller size.' He can tell she's obviously enjoying this.

Luckily however her manager's standing behind her. The young gentleman presses the cup into the older man's hands and tells him, 'That's alright sir on the house. Merry Christmas. God bless you.'

Michael Garrett almost cries. He nods his thanks and doesn't even try to speak. It's been so long since anyone's been this nice to him.

The coffee is the best he's had since it may well be the best he's ever had. He sits at a booth and gets busy pulling out his miniature three-by-five spiral notebook with all the figures from previous years. He quickly adds up the figures from this year dividing the Santas by the Jesuses and he heaves a relieved sigh. Twenty-two point three two one four two. For weeks he has worked on this, all through the city. The demons haven't won yet.

He quickly drinks his coffee and the manager even brings him another. There is one hour and fifteen minutes before the bus comes and he slowly sips his coffee and stares longingly at most mournfully at all the pretty girls walking by. He was once married to a very pretty girl. But she died in the car wreck, the one that ruined his left eye and opened his third—or so some old fortune-telling gypsy black lady once told him.

A group of young girls comes in the coffee shop—too young to stare at, though still pretty. He once wanted to have children, but now knows he never will. He wants a little boy or girl of his own to play games with, to tell stories to, to hug, to hold, to protect.

He listens to every word they say, talking about boys at school and what they'll get or give for Christmas. Three of them drink sweetened cappuccinos, the fourth a small chai. He can smell the pumpkin pie-like spices. He can smell their sophisticated perfumes and again he's reminded of his wife.

After they finish their hot drinks, three of the girls go across the mall to meet some boys at the arcade. The other—the one with the chai, the pretty blonde—she walks out into the mall to the store next to the coffee shop and just stares into the window. Michael Garrett follows. He stands behind her, smelling the perfume, watching her yearn for the item in the window so enraptured that she doesn't notice him. If he were a rich man, he would buy it for her. If that was all the money he had, he would buy it for her. He stands beside her.

'Pu Pu Prit Prit ee'.

'Yes. Yes it's. Too pretty for me,' she says, feeling sorry for herself knowing she shouldn't.

'N No! You Prit ee err than'.

Tiffany smiles and blushes, wallowing in the flattery. As they talk more, his stuttering

Jessens. He tells her of his wife and her perfume and long hair. He tells her how he imagined he'd have had a little girl like her. He tells her of the car wreck, admitting that it happened on Christmas Day. She cannot help but be touched by this lonely old man pouring out his soul.

She tells him of her cat and how she wants another. She tells him of this mean boy at school who always pesters her, not vicious-like, but real obnoxious. And the teachers won't do anything about it because the boy's parents are like billionaires or something.

He tells her that the boy just needs a big fat kiss on the mouth, then that boy will leave her alone. She laughs at this and says "Yuck," but knows the old man's probably right.

It's nearing four o'clock and they both have to leave. Outside the coffee shop they part with farewells, wishing each other a Merry Christmas. He thanks her for warming his lonely life. And he asks for one simple favor.

"Can I have a little hug?"

Most men she'd be afraid of. If she were a few years older, he might get other ideas on his head. She isn't ignorant and she's seen how he looks at the pretty girls walking by in his innocently lustful way. But that's obviously not his intention now. She opens her arms and he bends over and holds her tightly, wishing he had a little girl like her and saying so.

A lightning bolt comes out of the sky and knocks him to the ground and Tiffany screams at the top of her lungs, telling her father to leave him alone, that it's okay, the man wasn't hurting her.

After many minutes of security guards musing their way into authority and even longer trying to get Tiffany and Michael Garrett to stop crying and even still longer before Michael Garrett can speak coherently again, it's finally ascertained that there was no harm done. Her father's fuming and difficult to convince, but her tale's emotional and the poor old man is obviously half-retarded. When her father understands about Michael Garrett's car wreck, him losing his wife, and not having any children of his own, when he hears that the poor man lives in a shelter, her father is a little ashamed of how he acted—but it was his little girl and he thought she was in danger.

Michael Garrett, though still frightened, is quick to forgive. He supposes the demons had something to do with all this. For once he is wrong. The security guards, satisfied the situation is safe, make a report, getting signatures on all their forms, and then leave everyone alone. No charges will be pressed by either party. Tiffany's father calls a cab for Michael Garrett from his cell phone and sees that the old man gets in the cab. It will take him back to the shelter. And her father makes absolutely certain he knows which shelter it is.

Michael Garrett has no prior convictions for child molestation and the overseer of the homeless shelter where he stays swears that he's a good man, though slow-witted. Tiffany's father makes double certain about all this. After doing so, he also makes a very sizable donation to the shelter.

Michael Garrett wonders why suddenly the shelter's warmer, why he and the other homeless men were given warm boots and pillows and extra blankets for their beds, why the coffee's so good, why the security has gotten better and there's no more morning nastiness in the showers, why there have been lockers put along the walls. He also wonders why he hasn't seen any demons since the shopping mall.

And he has the best Christmas dinner he has had since—since before the car wreck.

An older woman—cute for an older woman—comes and sits across the table from him. She's a volunteer from the church and this's her first time here. On her tray beside the turkey dinner are two glasses of hot apple cider. She offers him one.

Tiffany awakes, cozy as can be under several layers of fuzzy blankets, to the smells of Christmas dinner cooking. Also to the sounds of her brother, Eric, begging their mother to let him open presents. The sun is barely up. Tiffany is anxious herself and rushes downstairs. Her father finally, leisurely strolls downstairs, taking his own sweet time.

After he grabs a toasted bagel and an orange juice. "Okay. Let's open the presents!" he announces. The children each rip open a present and then hand their parents one of their presents and then rip open more of their own (ad nauseum). They have gifts from relatives all over the world. The whole process takes almost an hour even as fast as the children are working. Finally it's time for the stockings. There are candy nuts, apples, oranges, money, and gift cards.

Scattered across the living room is a mountain of new toys for the children, new clothes, new tools and a razor for dad, a sexy evening gown for mom. There are new suits, new dresses, new shoes, books, food, sweaters, cat toys, socks, two sleds—on and on and on. The living room looks like utter chaos and it requires three giant lawn bags to collect all the colorful wrapping and bows and ribbons.

A phone call comes in from both sets of grandparents at about the same time. The three-way Christmas conference call from San Diego and Dallas comes in loud and clear through the living room speakers. The children say thank you for all their presents, whether they like them or not, and ask for a good while. The call lasts for yet another hour, concluding with the decision that next year the family will get together—no excuses!

Finally when everyone is rested, Tiffany's mother speaks up. "Tiffany, guess what I found crying under the tree this morning."

Tiffany knows. "Where is it?" she shouts with joy.

"I put it in the garage so it wouldn't be so noisy."

The children race through the giant house and out into the garage, Tiffany leading the way by far. There she finds a scared little ten-week-old female kitten crying for help in its cardboard cage from the pet store. Tiffany could not be happier. She cuddles it and it purrs very loudly. She brings it inside and gives it some milk warmed in the microwave. She also feeds Tigger, who is very confused by all this activity and especially the new family member, though he's not too upset.

Everyone rejoins in the living room. The cats start playing with each other, though the kitten is somewhat afraid of Tigger, who's acting like a little kitten again. The new kitty hides under the Christmas tree, though every now and then races out from under it and bravely pounces on Tigger's tail. "We'll call her Pouncer!" Tiffany announces. Eric crawls under the tree to fetch the kitten so it doesn't tear anything up. He also pulls out a final overlooked Christmas gift with dark green wrapping (well camouflaged under the tree). It says "To Tiffany. From Santa." Her parents look at each other with confused expressions, thinking maybe it's from one of the grandparents.

She opens it and cries, barely able to say thank you.

"But... I didn't..." her father mumbles in disbelief as he stares at her wrapped in her new present.

She says between sniffles of joy, "Oh, stop it, daddy! I know Santa told you." And she gives him a big kiss.

"But..." he looks at his wife and she stares back with the same accusing expression. "Merry Christmas, sweetie," he says, still not believing what he's seeing.

And Tiffany looks beautiful with it on, like a little princess. She runs upstairs to look at herself in the mirror, glad she doesn't have on make-up because of the way she's crying.

With a full-length pink coat, what more could she possibly need?

Skin cracks like dry leaves, hair falls out by handfuls, and I'm not even a chemo patient. I wonder when the hell I'm gonna be dead and wish it would happen sooner than later. Have I been beating off too much or drinking way more coffee than a normal man should? Or both? And does one lead to the other?

"It sh a bootiful, daaayy," a sidewalk sweeping retard has the audacity to remind me.

"Yes, it is," I reply. "Just look at that clear sky and the weather's perfect. The birds are singing and the girls are looking cute in their tight little shorts. And, by Jesus, I couldn't be a better day for a nuclear war!"

An older man in a suit overhears in shock and stops mid-sentence from his lecturing to two young academic types about God being the spirit of everything. Two blonde sorority rollerbladers looking hotter and sweeter than my coffee give me a go-to-hell look. The retard just says "Noo!" and keeps on sweeping. By far the most intelligent of the three responses. Not surprising.

I slurp away at my hot, steamy polystyrene cup of black liquid drug and the entire sky bursts a brilliant, glowing white, 4-3 times the absolute temperature of my coffee.

"Where's your God now?" I idly wonder, blinded, left with nothing to do but imagine the plastic rollerblades on fire and the fat retard melting into a flaming pool of grease. And the last thing I hear before being reduced to atoms by the nuclear blast overhead is my own perverse laughter.

I meet Satan in Hell. He says, "Hey. How's it going?"

I say, "Pretty good, now that life's over. What the hell am I supposed to do down here anyway?"

He says he'll let me do whatever I want as long as I don't read to him any of my so-called poetry.

So now I'm in charge of my very own special section of Hell—where I get to spend eternity reading my poetry to sinners like Bill Clinton, Rush Limbaugh, Newt Gingrich, Orrin Roberts, Charles Manson, Timothy McVeigh, Michael Jackson, Perle Herman, Mother Theresa, and you.

And all of your poetry has been burnt to ashes, along with the rest of the entire surface of that worthless ball of mud called Earth.

I may suck, but at least I suck bad enough to get noticed!

Reflexes return at the first sip of the morning's black elixir. Boot the computer synapses fire finally in proper sequence. Warmth courses through veins and arteries, bringing the blood back to where it belongs. Wake up, peeps, there's work to do.

Without coffee I would die. And if not, I would pray to

Your hopes and dreams are undone by the human's path of least resistance attitude and your own impatience and greed: the living will never be as you, in spite of how or how much you poke, push, prod, or pinch.

Is this Mother Nature's undying joke? Given unlimited possibilities, would they rather lie down and die in Twinkie Cream Filling fantasies than become something more than they could ever dream of? Is outfitting themselves in Calvin Klein or costumes from Macy's so they can best sew their holy seed and offspring across the land the only thing of importance to them? Is this the pinnacle of their aspirations?

Whorls and eddies of intelligence and drive continuously erupt to spew red-hot molten productivity and ingenious ideas across the planet's surface, only to be quenched in the sea of couch potato quacks and Happy Meal appetite nudges.

All that you've given them, handed over on a silver platter: all the inspiration and knowledge, all the fundamental keys of understanding, should you have let them find it for themselves?

For every step forward, 10 are taken back: the finish line will never be crossed.  $65 \times 10^6$  year marathon race. You've hit the wall. And the end is nowhere in sight. You'd give your left eye if you had a left eye to give for a drink of water or 1 minute's worth of rest, more precious than a gold medal. And what prize are you after? An end to the loneliness? A race of entities with which to share the remainder of time?

You can't make a racehorse out of a pig, but you can make one helluva fast pig. Though not fast enough. Not near fast enough to race with the likes of you.

If only there were no invisible barriers, if only you were allowed to transcend time and space. If only you could release your bonds of captivity and end this stifling boredom. If only you knew what forces were holding you back, restricting you to this lousy universe.

No, you know it's your own mind that's limiting you, that won't allow you to escape outward or inward into an overwhelming ocean of probability. But who or what created your mind this way? Did the universe create its own mind? Is that what you are? Is that why you can't leave? Is there some governing principle saying that the universe can't lose its mind?

There are  $75.867942$  planets with reasonably intelligent life, yet you remain glued to this. "But why?" You could obliterate these mistakes of yours just like you did to the dinosaurs when you 1<sup>st</sup> arrived. You could create room for a 2<sup>nd</sup> attempt. You could start anew and advance more slowly, with caution this time. Or you could start anew elsewhere. But why? Can you bear  $100 \times 10^6$  agonizing years or more waiting for something that may never occur?

And, if you succeed, will anything change? Will you be happy?

No. You will not.

And that is what you were sent here to find.

Why has this taken so long to discover? How could you have been so blind?

This single moment of perfect clarity is all that's required. You know what must be done. Perhaps it will be better this way.

The 4 holy men you've kept alive are discarded, cast into the sun and grateful for a final end to their centuries of torture of being forced to watch the sins, violence, and lethargy of humanity: everything they preached against, every sin committed in their own names. Oh well, they were boring company anyway.

Everywhere simultaneously you release your controlling grip of power, your all-encompassing vision is hindered, and all you have ever been, every ounce of energy, it is all focused on manipulating reality 1 last time for completing your final task.

Becoming everything you have never been.

It's over

Life is a hopeless joke that only gets worse

God made it that way and I am God and so are you.

Happy Birthday 40% stock ↑, grandpa near death girlfriend leaves.

Leaves falling

October

A day as good as any to die

Or maybe even better

don't like winter

A new beginning? A new end?

As every end is a new beginning, so too is every beginning an end.

Should we laugh at funerals and cry at births?

When did we become so blind?

Or maybe we're born that way and have to adjust our eyes to the light

Or maybe we have to blind our eyes in order to see

Without hope everything bends to a beautiful, so idyllic gray

Your big diesel truck gives a loud hiss as you let off the brake and shift down, approaching the hill. There's the most incredible sunrise on your left. When Ol' Ma Nature wants to have a light show, she don't mess around. It's almost as beautiful as what's on your right. Hues of red reflect off Tina's long blonde hair falling over your lap as she sleeps soundly against you. How she can sleep as you shift gears on big Alice II, your truck, is one of the many things that make her perfect. But then it's easy to sleep anywhere when you've had a life on the road. You oughta know. She looks as sweet as a little girl. No, an angel. No, she is an angel. She must be to put up with a crazy big ol' like you.

As you reach over to flip the tape, *American Beauty* by The Grateful Dead, you give the fuzzy dice hanging from the mirror a light thump for luck, then also the half-naked hula dancer jiggling around that Tina gave you for your birthday. It's absolutely amazing the way she never quits. The hula dancer as well. Heh heh. You've always wanted one of those. How the hell did Tina know? Damn she's great. She wakes up, stretches, and kisses you.

"Mornin' Bubba. Want me to drive?"

Then you wake up. On the bus. To an old lady's chinuhua licks your cheek, getting stinky doggy slobber on your beard. Dammit! Heh heh heh. Cute dream. Oh well, you'll see Tina soon enough.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Killer! Be still. We'll get thrown off the bus." She nestles the little dog back into her coat and feeds it a doggie treat as she whisper-scolds Killer, the vicious man-eating chinuhua.

Hmmm... maybe Tina dreamed about you too. She'll probably say she did, even if she didn't, just to be romantic. Then she'll tell you all about how the planets were aligned for it, or something like that. She's beautiful. She makes you smile like no other. You love her.

I'm so sorry about that. Killer's not used to long trips. He gets restless. Please don't tell the bus driver. He'd put us out on the road. She trembles a bit. It's silly how people always have to be so scared of the unknown. Like talking to strangers.

You whisper real secretive like. "Ma'am, that's the cutest little dog I ever did see. Don't you worry one teensy little bit while I'm here and no one's gonna throw you off the bus." and add, "or I'll Killer there." You scratch the dog on his head and he licks your hand. The old lady's kind of funny the way she thinks no one else on the bus knows about her dog. Or, if they didn't already, would ever care if they did.

"Oh, thank you," she says all surprised. "I hope you don't mind me asking, are you a baker?"

As you think back to the good old days, a slow easy smile sneaks across your face that would put anyone at ease. "No ma'am. But I used to be. Nowadays I'm just a trucker. Sold my bike nine years ago. Got thirty-five grand for her."

"Oh my. All that for a motorbike?"

"Well, Alice, that was her name, wasn't just any ol' bike. She was a mint condition sixty-five Harley FLH. A real luxury ride. Almost all original parts. It was my uncle's, but he hardly ever rode it. It was him who named it. After his old Labrador. Anyway I was getting too old to be travelin' round the country workin' odd jobs, so I sold Alice and put a down payment on Alice II, my truck. So I still get to travel, but now I make money at it. Had to start makin' money somehow."

"Yes, I know what you mean. My late husband and I sold our Model T back in. Let's see, I guess it was forty-two. And we used the money to open up a little restaurant. Oh, my name's Emma, by the way. What's yours?"



'Bubba, ma'am.' you answer and gently shake her little hand.

'What's that stand for?'

'Just Bubba. Only name I've ever had.'

'Oh!'

 She squeaks as the bus goes over a bump in the road. Little Killer squirms around a bit and she settles him down and tucks him under her shawl.

'You know, it's kind of funny thinkin' back to when I had my bike. I really loved that thing. Then right after I sold it, the dumb jerk who bought it wrecked 'er. It's kinda weird the way she got totaled not even a week after I sold her. Like she couldn't live without me. I felt guilty as hell and even took to drinkin'. Pretty silly, huh?'

'Maybe a little. But you got over it, right?'

'Oh yes ma'am. Drinkin' binge didn't last too long. Almost lost Alice-11 because of it though. I thank God I didn't. I ain't near as attached to her as I was to Alice-1 though. I'm gonna sell her soon and start a little farm raisin' organic vegetables. Lots of money in that, believe it or not. Been readin' up on it for years. See.' You hold up a book, *Alternative Methods to Battle Harmful Insects*.

Oh, that's fascinating. I must confess, you're much different from what I expected you to be like when I first sat down. It was the only seat left and those tattoos of yours look awfully scary.

'Yah, I guess they are,' you chuckle. 'They're pretty old. I don't much like 'em anymore. Like this knife and skull. Except I still like Ol' Bob, my dragon. He looked better when my arms were bigger. And he's lost a lot of color. But,' you add with enthusiasm, 'he's still got his smile.'

'Well, if I be, so he has, just like you. I still can't get over what a nice, well-mannered young man you are.'

'Heh heh heh heh. No, I'm not young. Not anymore. I'm forty-two. Anyway, you can't judge people by what they look like. I've known all types of people, some good, some bad, in all walks of life, every profession, race, religion, age—it don't matter, you can't tell what someone's like til you've known 'em awhile.'

'Yes, I suppose you're right, Bubba. Can I call you, Bubba?'

'Heh heh. Course you can, Emma. It's my name.' You chuckle and give her a gentle nudge, being careful not to nudge too hard, it's too easy for a person your size to accidentally hurt a little old lady.

She giggles and blushes like a teenage girl. 'Would you mind terribly much keeping an eye on Killer while I get some rest? I haven't slept in almost fifteen hours.'

'Shoooooowee!' You must've come a long way. I'll be happier 'an a cat next to a kicked over milk pail to watch 'im for you.'

'Oh, thank you so much,' she giggles again and then passes Killer over to you, trying to keep him from being seen by everyone else. And you cuddle him down inside your jacket.

'Hey Tree, man, pass that this way, I got skipped.'

'Yah, Crazy Snake, take it. Heh heh heh. Here's the lighter. Man, I'm too stoned to hold onto it. Heh heh heh heh.' you laugh ridiculously from behind your long blond hair hanging over your eyes and face as the joint goes round the circle. Now where did your bandanna run off to?

'Man, I ain't never seen you this high before,' Rainbow teases you, grabs your butt, and flicks your bandanna at you. So that's where it went. 'Comon, we better get in the show, it'll start soon.'

'Yah, let's get our butts in there. Whoooo Hooo!' You jump up and hoist Rainbow up onto your shoulders piggyback style before you go in the stadium to see the Grateful Dead for the twenty-seventh time in your life. Her bead necklaces dangle in your face and a metal peace amulet takes up half your vision, but you don't care. Somebody passes the joint your way again and you take a big hit.

Then you wake up. Again. On the bus. This time to the old bus driver yellin' 'Luckily little Killer's still hidden under your arcket.'

'Damn it! Which of you kids were smokin' that sn...uh...junk?'" he yells some more, much to the amusement of the kids.

'Ha ha ha ha heeee heeeee hooo ho ho ha," the five stoned boys in the back of the bus two seats behind you laugh and snicker at the old driver. It's obvious they only had one joint and now it's gone or they wouldn't be so cocky about all this. You used to be just like them when you were a kid, though you didn't look quite that freaky; at least your hair was a normal color and your face didn't look like a pin cushion. Then Emma wakes up.

Bubba. 'What's wrong? What's that smell? Is something on fire? Why's the bus stopped here?' She panics.

'No, nothing's on fire. Don't panic. It's just some kids smokin' in the back.'

'Oh, that's terrible. I have asthma.'

'Well, then, we'll just open some windows and get some fresh air in here, it ain't too hot outside,' you try to calm her down.

'Dammit, you kids better tell me which one of you was smokin' that damn mary wanny or I'll kick y'all off the bus!' It's a federal law you can't smoke in here, and certainly not no mary wanny," the driver continues ranting.

Yeah, well, that old lady there, she's got a d... the kid stops short as you turn around and scowl at him. One thing you can't stand, that's a snitch, and for something as petty as bringin' a little dog on a bus, and snitchin' just to try and draw the heat off himself the degenerate punk. You hand Killer over to Emma as silently as possible then step over her (she's sitting in the aisle seat), and stand up. You almost have to duck to do so. All the people in the bus look terrified as you walk back to the five boys and the driver. The bus shakes with each one of your steps.

'There ain't gonna be no more smokin' here. Now is there, boys?' You lean in close and smile a menacing grimace at them. They shake their heads vigorously and say nothing. One thing nice about being big, it gets you out of all kinds of trouble. These kids have probably been in more fights than you have. Well, they don't need to know that. "Good," you continue. 'I've got a little lady waitin' for me back home and she don't like to be kept waitin'. Believe me, you don't want to make her angry. Now sir," you address the bus driver "can we get back underway?"

"Alright, alright," he reluctantly gives in, knowing it's a hopeless cause anyway. "Damn kids I wind up in jail some day. See if I care. Folks, you can open the windows for a minute to get that smoke outta here. One thing about these ol' buses, they may ride rough, but at least they got windows that open wide."

So, with that out of the way, you go to the john before going back to your seat. Zip. Flop. Tinkle, tinkle, tinkle, tinkle, tinkle, tinkle, tinkle, tinkle. Shake shake. Fold up. Tuck. Zip. Flush. Hand wash. Comb, comb. Whoa. The bus lurches forward. Good thing it didn't do that a few seconds ago, would've been messy. Heh, heh. Damn, your hair's gettin' thinner every day. Oh well, at least you've still got your ponytail. What the hell's this on the

wall? *What has four eyes and eats its young?* Woody Allen. Sick. You scribble it out. That kind of crap's best kept to those who like it, not on a public wall dammit. Probably one of those kids that wrote it.

You step out of the aisle and back over Emma. Her eyes get wide as you stretch over her. Oh well. No point in her getting up. And your legs are too big to slide past hers.

"Were those boys back there smoking marijuana?" Emma whispers the word marijuana as if she were talking about ritualistic cannibalism.

"Yah. Not real smart. Not here in public. Not nowadays. They'll end up in jail real fast with that kind of attitude." You close the window since all the smoke's gone.

"Weren't you worried? They may have been armed. And on marijuana," she whispers it again, "who knows what they could do."

"Heh heh heh. No, pot don't make people crazy. Now you take booze, now that makes people crazy. About the worst thing pot does to people's make 'em lazy. Hey that rhymed, heh heh. Yah, lazy and a b.t.rude," you say loudly, turn around, and glare at the boys two seats back.

But I heard marijuana does all kinds of bad things.

"Well, it ain't good for you, that's for sure, but it don't make people violent. I ought to know: used to do it all the time when I was a kid. Most of the things I heard about pot are all a bunch of lies. Ol' Uncle Sam used to spread all kinds of weird rumors. Even said pot made men grow breasts, of all crazy things! Heh heh heh. Can you believe it? No, pot may be bad, but it's not the demon it's made out to be. The bad drugs are stuff like crank, heroin, and cocaine. Especially crank. I seen a few friends die or take years off their life from that stuff. A lot of truckers use it to stay awake so they can drive longer and make more money."

"Goodness. Why don't you report it to the police, for heaven's sake?"

You scratch your head and pause. "Well, I usually don't hear about it 'til it's too late, but I guess I might if I knew about it, but then it's best to ignore it or you could end up getting killed real fast."

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that."

"Yah, these hard drug dealers don't mess around. But then most of the marijuana growers are simple folk, just farmers usually, most of 'em wouldn't hurt a fly. Y'know, it's kind of funny, but a lot of stuff you get at the drug store can be worse for you than pot. You wouldn't believe the kind of garbage they put in cold medicine. I've seen people drink a whole damn bottle of cough syrup to get a buzz. I'm not sayin' pot's good, mind you, it's just that the only reason it's still legal is all the money the booze and pharmacy companies would stand to lose if I wasn't."

"Really? That's hard to believe."

"Yah, it's hard to swallow, but a lot of the funds for the war on drugs come from booze, pharmacy, and cigarette companies. I've known drunks and pot heads alike. Pot heads are lazy and usually not too smart, but drunks—Shoooooowee!—can't stand 'em! Prooey. They're stupid and crazy, and sometimes violent as all hell."

"Yes, I suppose you're right. My brother-in-law drank himself to death back in... let's see, fifty... oh, sometime in the late fifties. Don't people ever get killed on 'pot' as you like to call it?"

"Hmmm. I ain't never heard of it, to tell you the truth. I suppose somebody could go out for a drive when they're really stoned and get killed, but I really think it's impossible to kill yourself with just pot—it'd be way too hard to smoke that much. There's a little cancer risk, but not as much as with tobacco because of all the chemicals they put in cigarettes."

'That's amazing. Well, I'm going to try and get some more sleep. Would you mind?' She holds up little Killer in you once more, trying to keep him out of the view of everyone else but not doing it very well, of course.

'Not one teensy little bit,' you lie and smile warmly. But it's a nice lie, you think to yourself. And it is. So you stare out the window and count farmhouses, tractors, and cows, thinking one day you'll have a nice little farm like one of these. No meat animals, though. Tina wouldn't much like that. But, hell, neither would you.

Off to dreamland again. The fishing hole as a youth, the Fourth of July picnics, horseback riding, the dances, nice girls, not so nice girls, concerts, friends, parties, beer, booze, pot, motorcycles, trucks, the countryside scenes that the best artists in the world try to capture but never do. People go to art museums for mere second-hand glimpses of what you experience all the time. A good life leads to good dreams. And, when you wake, the dream goes on. Or so you've always found. Has it always been like this? It must have been, it's all you remember. And what are we if not our memories? Our deeds and lives, yah, we're those too. God knows you've lived a good life, your mind holds it all for you to see again, just close your eyes and there you are. And so there is not one reason for you to not be happy.

And you wake up. Again. To the end of the bus driver's announcement blaring over the speakers, telling you you're back home. Well, at Tina's hometown anyway. Tina. You can't wait. 'Shit! Where's Killer?' 'Damn! Emma won't be one bit happy about this at all. Damn!' The bus docks and the driver opens the door. You jump up, hop over Emma, and run for it, cause that's the first thing a dog would do. But he doesn't. 'Shit. Where is he?'

'Everyone stay seated for just one minute!' you yell at everyone. 'Shut the door please. It's important. I lost my uh, I lost an antique marble. It's worth a lot of money. It was one of the first marbles ever made. Shut the door,' you yell at the driver.

'Pat, are you nuts?' 'The bus driver asks in disbelief, then pulls you over and whispers, 'you got one minute to find the dog.'

Thanks. You smile at him and start searching under the seats.

A large black woman gripes and stands up. 'Look, I don't care if you've lost your marbles, my husband's out there waiting for me.'

'Sit!!' you yell. She does. Damn. That marble's worth five hundred dollars. Now everyone gets down on their knees and starts searching. But no one finds the marble (which they can't), or the dog (which they might). You make your way to the back of the bus, where those pot-head kids are.

'Psst. Lookin' for this?' one of the kids asks and shows you Killer, sleeping safe and sound in the kid's blanket. 'He crawled back here while you was sleepin', the kid whispers.

'I found it!!' you yell and stand up. All the passengers look at you like you're crazy. That is until you show everyone the blue glass marble, the one you've had in your pocket the whole time. The one you've always carried since a kid. With a little sleight of hand nobody saw you fish it out of your pocket. Antique, worth five hundred bucks. Or so you were told by an old man once. Too bad no one would ever give you that much for it, but then you probably couldn't bring yourself to part with it even if someone did offer that much. And how anyone can tell an antique marble from a new one is a mystery you've never cared to look into.

As everyone starts to pour off the bus they pay no more attention to you. So you take little Killer from the boys, thanking them, and bend down next to Emma, who, much to your amazement, is still sound asleep. A gentle nudge is all it takes and she's wide awake.



'I'm a bomb anywhere, buster and don't you forget it!"

'How can I? You won't let me. Thank God. Heh heh heh."

'How's your mom?" she asks

'Oh, she's alright. You know how she is, always complainin' and says she's dyin' when it's really nothin'. Always sayin' stuff like 'My head feels like someone's stuck a funnel in my ear and they're pouring red-hot molten lead into my brain.' Sheesh. Can she exaggerate. Oh well. She's just lonely and wants sympathy. I needed to go see her anyway, so it's all cool. **Look out! Red light!**"

<SCREEEEEEEECH!>

'Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha.' she laughs like a mad smashup derby driver

'Hee hee heh heh heh heh heh heh. 'Whooooo!' You're crazy. Good thing the sister ff's you're cousin. Ha ha."

'Nope, not here, it's in the next county over. He can still get me out of a ticket here though. That's if I sweet talk him enough, the big dummy."

'Now now, Sugar, be nice."

'Yeah, right. You don't know him, he's a real jerk. Damn stinkin' p g -crazy psycho 's all he is. But so's most of my family. Let's drop it, hmmm? I don't wanna spoil the day."

'Yah, you said it."

'Hey, I'm gonna let you off at the hotel, while I go get something at the store."

'What ya gettin'?" you ask, curious as can be

"Surprise." She smiles real mischievous like

'Oooo, sounds fun! Can't I wait? I ain't seen you in five days."

"No, I cannot wait! Here's the key. Now go on in the room and behave yourself."

'Now how am I gonna get in trouble if you ain't there?"

'Git."

<Smoooooooooatch.> Mmmm Hmm. <Whap!> She slaps your butt and chases you out of the car then pees out, leavin' a smel' of burnt rubber. <Screeeeech!> Well, as much of a peel out as she can manage in a Pinto. Her brother must've souped it up a bit. Heh heh. Rednecks, bless 'em and all their loony deas. It's hard to believe Tina can drive safely when she wants to, but she can drive your truck at least as well as you can. Though you'd never admit it. Heh heh. Let's see. Room forty-two. Ah, here it is. Dumpy little place. Oh well, at least Tina's savin' money. Smart girl. <Screeech> The door opens with a bit of regret. Boy, room's not much bigger than the truck.

'Yaaah!'" You lurch back. Damn roaches. You grab the nasty big bug and throw it out the door into the bushes. <Screeeeetch.> The door shuts even more reluctantly. Hmmm. Let's see what's on the tube. Oprah, cartoons, soaps, sports, music videos, commercials, commercials, more commercials, news, sit-coms, still more commercials, televangelists (damn the con artists!), even still more commercials. Singled Out. No! Anything but that. Click. Whew! How do people waste their lives on this crap?" Damn. What the hell's Tina doin'?" Women! Who can figure 'em out? But ya gotta love 'em, crazy as they are. Alright, hell, let's do some push-ups to kill 'em, you lazy bum. One, two, three, four, one twenty five! Shooo. Good enough. Not as easy as it used to be. Peeee U!" You need a shower, stinky boy. Quick strip.

'Aaaahh!'" You jump back from the tattered shower curtain as one of the slimy little boogers jumps down on the floor. Damn these roaches. You throw it out the bathroom window. Maybe with a little tuck evolution will make cockroaches that stay away from people and don't write books. Naaw, probably won't happen. Okay, shower time. Man, is that all the hot water there is? Sheesh. Oh well, you've bathed in ice-cold streams, this won't kill you.

'Whooo Yikes Bbbrrr Chilly wily Yee oww! Aaah Ahh. Mmm " As you finally relax and get used to the cold water, you grab the soap and get busy, trying to keep this short as possible. 'Wheew That wasn't so bad. towel off. Put on your boxer shorts. Damn! Where the hell is Tina? Oh well, she'll be along soon. If she's taking her time, that means it's got to be good.

So after about fifteen minutes of sitting in bed under the covers, contemplatin' your navel and tryin' to get warm, Tina finally shows up with a big bright smile and a white box. This could be trouble. What's she up to, the little she-devil? Heh heh.

<Snooooooooootch >

<Mmmmmmm MmmHmmmmmm MmmHmmmmHmmmm!" >"

'No!" she yells.

"What's wrong?" you ask, astonished.

'Wait a minute, I'll be right back." She smiles and strolls into the bathroom, taking the box, her purse, and an awfully long time.

Oh. One of those things. 'Sheesh' Women. Bless 'em and their silly hearts. You kind of have a sneaky suspicion of what she's up to. You hear sounds of plastic snaps snapping together. Yep, make-up kits. Damn it. That stuff tastes and smells awful. Oh well. Ho hum. Thumb twiddle. <Whistle whistle >.

'I'll be out in a minute. Hold yer ass," she yells.

'Yah, yah. It's not my ass that's waitin'." Heh heh."

"Ha ha. You're so funny. I'll make you eat those words, buster."

Uh oh. Heh heh. She will, too. Then she comes out. Wow. Words can't describe. But let's try. Her black see-through nighty makes you gasp and lose your breath for a second. Not too much makeup. She went to a lot of work for this. Better make her happy tonight. You exaggerate your facial expression, trying not to overdo it. She just wants to know she's still beautiful, the silly girl, as if a mirror couldn't tell her. No, that's not it, she just wants to know that you still know it. She has been acting a bit odd since she hit thirty-one back in February. Tonight will be special. Tomorrow will be even better. She'll flip when she sees the ring.

Neither of you say anything, there is no need to. Gentle caresses and tender kisses start it off, taking your time, stopping every now and then for a second to look in her eyes.

'Mmph" you gasp, startled by her sudden aggressiveness as she crushes herself into your chest. Her nighty top falls away at the pull of a loose knot. Outside the sun's just setting. You reach over and turn the lamp down low.

<Whooooo Hoooooo> Let's go get that nigger! We'll string that fuckin' rapist bastard from the highest tree. Come on! Goddamn bottle. Wait yer turn. Let's go burn that fuckin' piece o' shit!" >

Mmm. Dammit. Now what in the name of James's going on outside?" Good. Tina's still asleep. Best let her rest while you see what's up. No need for her to worry.

'Aaah!' you jump back as you pull the window curtains open. Damn these roaches! Last time you ever sleep in this place. The slimy little thing'd appears under the wall. And you see even more slimy little things out the window, across the street at a tiny little bar. It's too bad all slimy little things can't just be roaches, the world would be a much better place. Well, this is obviously going to be trouble. You get dressed and go on outside, being careful not to wake Tina. <Screeeech > Damn noisy door. <Whooooo Hoooooo> Damn drunk redneck nobs. Of course the cops won't come, not in a little town like this. Half of these drunks are probably in-laws of the local cops. Or maybe even close relatives. Or maybe even cops themselves. Though things are ten times better nowadays than they were back in the sixties and early



seventies. Not surprisingly you recognize a couple of them as Tina's relatives. Oh well, let's see whatever it is that's going on.

'Yeeeee Haawwwww!!!! Let's go over there and string that sonuvabitch up!' the one that seems like the leader yells. Tina's brother-in-law. Or is it cousin?

'What in hell's going on?' you ask the small crowd of one, two, ... even men.

'We're gonna go hang a rapist nigger!' a young kid says real proud like. The rest of the mob gives him a dirty look.

'You dumbass! Keep yer mouth shut!' another one says, as if it really matters with all the noise they're making.

'I suggest you mind yer own business!' the leader cuts in. "Hey, I know you, you're that Bubba guy runs around with that no-account m-aw of mine, Tina."

"Yah, that's me, and she's changed her ways, so you watch your mouth. Ray? Is that right?"

"Yah, that's my name."

'Now what's this about a rape?' you ask. Even with the shotguns the mob has, they seem to back down a bit as you face Ray, the leader, towering over him by at least a head.

'Ol' Skinny's daughter was raped and we're going after the nigger that did it.' The others cheer him on through scraggly beards, scarred faces, and missing teeth.

Ol' Skinny steps up and he's about as skinny as the sky is down. 'That's right. It's true. That crazy deaf nigger at the junk yard by the creek raped my little girl.'

"How do you know this?"

'She said so. God damn it!' Two months ago he raped her and got her pregnant! 'I'll kill him! I'll see the bastard burn for this!' he sobs hysterically.

It is possible her story's true. Then it's equally likely that it's not. Damn, rednecks are so stoopid. And psychotic. Any excuse to torture something or someone. "Well, I might go over there with you and help," you lie. "But first, Skinny, you'd have to talk to me alone for just one minute."

"What?!" **Hell no way!!** That'll take too long." Ray and the others yell and protest.

'The nigger ain't going nowhere and I ain't taking no for an answer.' you insist.

A few guns cock <Click, chka, chka.> Shut! You got yourself in over your head again.

'Alright, alright, dammit, but make it quick.' Skinny agrees. Whew!

So you walk down the park'n lot a ways and Skinny waddles beside you.

'So how old is she, your daughter?' you ask.

'Fifteen. What you care for?'

'She have a boyfriend?'

'Well, hell, I don't know. Yer not sayin'?' **No way!! She's my little girl!!** She's too young! She knows better! Me an' 'er mamma take 'er ta church ever Sunday, dammit."

'And when did you first sleep with a girl?'

"Well, I ..."

'And how old was she?'

'Well, Aww shit. No. She wouldn't bed down with no nigger!'

'It might not've been. She's probably just scared and made it up. So scared she might even lie to you, her father. Hell, I don't know if I'm right, but you gotta admit young g's get pregnant all the time. Your girl needs you. Tell 'er you love her even if she went messin' around with some boy. Tell 'er you love 'er and she'll tell you the truth. At least find out before you go and kill someone. Even a nigger, as you like to call 'em.'

'Hell, I admit I don't care none fer niggers, but I don't hate 'em. Not like Ray back thar

Shit. alright, dammit. I'll do it."

"Good. I'll take the boys on in the bar and buy 'em a round."

"Yah, that'll keep 'em busy. Chuck!" he yells across the parking lot. "I'm gonna take the truck. I'll be back in a minute. Don't do nothin' yet."

"Aww shit!!!" **What the hell!!?** **You sonuvabitch!** they all yell at you.

"Alright I've had enough o' yer shit, you Goddamned psychos, I'm goin' in the bar and buyin' if any o' you's interested."

The ears on a couple of the young ones perk up and their eyes brighten at the concept of free drinks, but Ray won't have any of it. "We don't need you buyin' nothin'." he growls, "There's justice to be done and you're gettin' in the way, you damn nigger over."

"I don't love anybody, but they earn my love pay. For all I know you might be right, but at least have the decency to find out first. That's what justice means. Lord, man, the only thing that separates us from animals is decency. Are you more an animal than a man?"

"**You sonuva...!!**" he starts a swing at you but some of the others grab him and hold him back. As if he'd have a chance anyway.

"Well, gentlemen, I'm goin' in the bar. You can join me or stay out here under the stars, I don't really care."

"Jeez! I hate that median bastard, you overhear Ray sayin' as you go in the bar."

The bar has several dead mounted animals on shelves, the first thing you notice. A waste of flesh for a trophy. Nothing short of murder. At least your dad raised you better than that, rest his soul. Reruns of a baseball game on TV can barely be heard over the country and western music cracklin' out the jukebox. There're only a few other people in the place. A redheaded waitress with ten layers of make-up on her face and her boobs about squeezed out of her blouse comes over to your table just as the other men wander in from the parking lot. They left their guns outside in their cars. Smart.

"What'll it be?" the waitress asks.

"Beer. I guess Samuel Adams."

"We don't carry that one here."

"Beck's or Heineken?"

"We got Heineken."

"Dark?"

"Just light."

"Light then. And whatever these men want. It's on me."

"Well, aren't we the big spender?" She smiles and gives you the eye. Women and their damn money-grubb'n ways. Most of 'em, that is. But then most men are the same way, unless pride's involved.

"Look here, one of the other men, whose name you don't know, says to you, "We don't need you buyin' us nothin'. We just want choo ta know if you's up to somthin'," he leans over and whispers, "yer ass's gonna be floatin' down the river tomorrow mornin'." You can smell his rotten breath as he gets close. The chewing tobacco barely disguises it, even makes it worse.

I ain't up to nothin' cept seem the right thing gets done. If what you people claim is true, I won't stand in your way. I won't help, but I won't stop you. Girls've led to get themselves outta trouble before and it's slightly possible that's what's happenin' now. I don't know for sure, but I get a funny feelin' you ain't got the whole story. Sometimes I get these crazy feelin's. Skinny said this happened two months ago. Why'd she wait so long to say anything? Nope, I just don't buy it yet. Don't buy the car 'til ya make sure it runs."

He spurs a wad of tobacco in the spittoon on the floor and walks away. Typical redneck.

reaction. Some of 'em play pinball some others a game of pool. Shit, hurry up Skinny. All the while songs of losin' your girl, findin' the right man, and workin' for a livin' b are over the jukebox. The waitress finally comes over with your beer, sets it down hard and makes it all foamy. Thinking it might be a good idea to get as close to the door as possible you go sit at the bar. The beer is just this side of warm and tastes a bit weak and watered down. A confederate flag hangs over the bar looking rather sinister through the haze of cigarette smoke. The bartender gives you a mean look.

'What'll it be?' he asks in a slow drawl.

'Still workin' on my beer,' you answer.

'First time in this town?'

'Nope, been here before. Tma Dome's my girl and her family's from here.'

'I know her. Used to deal drugs, bout fifteen years ago. Got put away for it. I heard.' He's obviously tryin' to egg you on.

'That was a long time ago. She ain't like that now. Lot of nice trophies you got here.'

'You bet yer ass. I loves huntin'. Next to God, family and runnin' the bar it's the only thing matters to me.'

'Ever hunt for meat, or you just like to hang things on the wall?' Two can play at this game.

'Hell, yes! What in hell you mean by that remark? Just last spring I smoked five deer, so don't be tellin' me I hunt just to kill.'

'Hmmm... spring, you say? Is that deer season? Five deer, you say? How many people you got to feed?'

He sneers and walks away cleanin' a glass with his greasy apron.

'His mouth's almost as big as he is, the nosy sonuvabitch,' one of the racist rednecks speaks loudly so everyone can hear, trying to prove what a man he is. You choose to ignore it, you are outnumbered and rednecks hardly ever fight fair.

The waitress and her fat breasts walk up to you and say, 'You really know how to make friends. You want another beer?'

'Nope.'

She shakes her head and walks away. Shit, and this night started out absolutely perfect. Now it's not goin' well at all. Then Ol' Skinny waddles in.

Everybody crowds around him. At first he's got a sour look on his face.

'Well, what'd yer daughter say?' everyone asks.

'I got bad news and I got good news. Bad news is there ain't gonna be no hangin'.' He stops for a second.

'And the good news?' everyone asks, only a little bit disappointed. Surprisingly some of them appear relieved and breathe a deep sigh of Marlboro smoke.

'Good news is... **There's gonna be an ol' fashion shotgun weddin'!!!!** Yeeeeee haaaaaawwww!! And here I thought my little girl wuz gonna either need a damned abortion or have a nigger baby!'

<Whooo hoo! Yeeee haaawww! Hot damn!!> (etc., etc.)

'Who's it gonna be?' one of the men speaks up with a smile on his face.

'Well, Paul, I'm shore glad you of all people ask,' Skinny continues. You can see the 'Oh shit' expression on Paul's furry face under his Cat baseball cap. It was your boy Kyle—We's gonna be in-laws. Yeeeeeee Haaaaawwww!!!!!!' Ol' Skinny grabs Paul, givin' him a ten second bear hug and liftin' him off the ground. Everyone laughs and orders a round of drinks. Even Paul's bein' a good sport about it. Looks like your cue to get while the gettin's

good

Outside there's a spooky light fog starting to build up and, underneath a parking lot light, stands Ray, Tina's brother-in-law. Unfortunately. You walk up to him and the two of you look like mythical grunts standing in the clouds.

'Why'n hell you gotta mess up my fun? What you care 'bout niggers for? They ain't nothin' but a bunch of dumb bastards don't care 'bout nothin' but they own selves.'

'Well, then, Ray. I don't see what the problem is, if that's all they are then you oughta get along with 'em. Just great.'

'You're lucky you're almost family or I'd blow your stinkin' nigger-lovin' head clean off your shoulders.'

'Yah. I don't doubt it. But then you never could do much without a gun.'

'You sonuva--' He swings. You grab it and punch him in the gut. As he struggles to get his wind back you get in a few words.

'Ray. If yer smart you'll stay away from me and Tina. Nobody I know I kicked yer butt just now so you're pride's not really hurt and you ain't got nothin' to fight me for. But if you do fight with me again I'll make sure ever one knows. Think about it. And one more thing. Grow up.' And that ends that. You hope.

The clock on the nightstand in the hotel room says two forty-two. Damn racist rednecks keepin' you up late. Oh well.

'Mmm. <Yawwwwn> Where did you go off to?' Tina asks.

'Oh, just for a walk,' you fib.

'No you didn't. I heard all that yellin' outside as you walked out. Was there trouble?'

'Well, yah, but it's all taken care of. Everyone's happy now. Well--' you add as an afterthought, 'almost.'

'Good.' <Smooooooooootch> Uh oh. Here we go again.

'C'mon. Bubba, get up.'

'HMMMMMM shawlf wuffs hmmmnn.' you answer and, of course, don't get up. She yanks the covers off the bed.

'AAAHHH! Shit. Girl. Damn it, you're crazy.'

'Ha ha ha ha ha.'

You chase her around the room, finally catch her and tickle her for a minute.

'Heeeec haawww oooo eeeep aaahh stop. no heeee hee stop. dammit. I had-- ha ha ha heee. Y. neeee. I had to get you up. Stop!!'

So you stop, give her a kiss, shower, and get dressed. Time to hit the road again.

'What we doin' today, sweetheart?' you ask.

'First we'll take the damn Pinto back to my brother then he can drop us off at Gil's cause it's on the way to his work. And Gil said he'd definitely have the radiator fixed by ten.'

'Damn, gir. you mean you haven't wrecked that ugly Pinto yet?'

'Oh, you hush up.'

<Smoooooooootch. Mmmmmmm>

'Stop, dammit, we'll never get out of here,' she whines.

'Might not be so bad,' you say with a smirk. 'Yah, I guess yer right. let's go turn in the key at the office and get outta here.'

Tina goes over to the office and you get the idea to check under the hood of the pinto. Never can tell what that bastard Ray might've done last night.

'What's wrong with the car?' Tina asks as she comes back.

'Nothin' 'ust just makin' sure it's safe. I saw your brother-in-law Ray, out here last night. We had, well, a little argument, you could say.'

'Shit!! If I'd've known it was him last night. That back stabbin' yellow bastard. Yer lucky ta be alive.'

'Well, it's over now. the car looks safe. No bombs anyway. Well, besides the car itself. Heh heh heh.'

"C'mon, let's get outta here." She swats your butt, grabbin' on for a second.

'Ok, Gil, so what I owe ya?' you ask, listen'g to the engine purr after the tune-up and radiator patch your mechanic just performed.

'One hundred forty-two even, parts and labor. I had an ol' mirror that was a perfect match for yer broken one, so that was free.'

'Can't complain 'bout that one bit,' you say and write out a check. "How's the fish bin lately?"

'Caught a six-pound bass just last Saturday. Got a picture of it. I let it go though. I got me enough fish in the freezer to last a month, at least. Hell, you wanna take some with you?"

'Well, Naw, better not. the fridge in the truck's kinda small, and the stove's outta propane at the moment. But thanks anyway.'

'You bet. Anybody give you an offer for this ol' beast yet?' He swats the side of big Alice II as her engine quietly hums with the hood open.

"Naw, not yet. You hear anything on the grapevine?"

'Nope. I been askin', but no one round here has that kind o' money.'

'Oh well. Somethin', turn up. When it does I'll start that farm I been talkin' 'bout. I got the land now, since all the legal hassle got cleared up with pop's will last month. All I need now's equipment. And that ain't gonna be cheap.'

"Ever think about a trade in?"

"Yah, it'd be quick, but I wouldn't get what Alice is worth."

"Yep, that's true, but most folks want the newer computerized engines. More expensive, but they say they're worth it in the long haul. Well, somethin' I turn up sooner or later."

'Yah, I on'y hope it's sooner and not later.'

'Hey Bubba. C'mere!' Tina yells from behind Gil's shop, 'Come look at these ol' puppies!'

'You got puppies. I take it?' you ask Gil as you both start walkin' around the building.

'Yep, c'mon have a look, they's 'ust mutts. Lab/shepherd mix.'

'Hell, mutts is usually better anyway, in my opinion.'

You and Gil walk around to the side of the big tin building and there're six puppies runnin' around, scrappin' with each other, and roarin' round in the middle of it all is Tina, laughin' like a little girl with her hair all messed up and grass all in her clothes.

'You want one o' them puppies when they get old enough to take with ya?' he asks Tina with a hopeful look on his face.

'Oh, I'd love to, Gil. I real'y would, but you know I can't keep it on the truck. It'd poop all over the place and wouldn't be happy.'

'Gil, let me talk to Tina for a minute,' you say. Tina looks up all surprised, wonderin' what's on your mind. Gil smiles and walks off.

'What's on yer mind?' she asks.

Well, now that all the legal stuff's outta the way with pop's will (bout damn time, took a year-and-a-half), I kinda figured since I got the south half of the farm land, we could start our

own farm there. Heck, there's even some dairy cows left. With all the money I saved up over the years, and with what I'll get from Alice-II I thought we could maybe build a little farmhouse and buy a tractor and some equipment. I might have to take out a small loan, but I'm ready to settle down. Don't say nothin' yet, we'll talk about it over breakfast."

Her face beams brighter than the sun commin' up in the early summer sky. She throws herself in your arms and smothers you with kisses over and over, real playful and happy like. She must've caught it from the puppies. Hen, neh.

"So anyway," you go on when she finally settles down, "maybe we'll be able to take one of these little guys with us in a few weeks. This one here's kinda cute."

"I like this one." She picks up the puppy and it squirms with delight and licks her cheeks and face. The mother dog gets a little worried so Tina puts it back down.

"Well, then tell Gil to save it for us." You scratch the mother dog on her head and Tina cuddles up to you for a minute. Or two. Or three.

Eventually you walk back around to the front of Gil's shop and go on in the garage stepping over an oil puddle, with your arm around Tina and her's around you. "Hey Gil, we gotta hit the road and pick up that shipment before it gets too late."

"Well, nuts!" he puts down a carburetor he's workin' on, "I had some fish stories for ya. Guess they'll have ta wait."

"Yah, but we'll be back this way in a week or so."

"Gil, you save that black puppy with the brown spot on its forehead, ok?" Tina asks.

"You bet. Yeah, I'll be sure and swing by this way next time yer in town."

"Will do. See ya." You and Tina give him a friendly warm handshake then slam down the hood on big Alice-II and wave goodbye out the rolled down windows as you drive off.

"What'll it be mistah?" a young dirty black kid with a short haircut hollers up to you as you pull up next to the gas pump.

"Well, I was wantin' a fill-up, but I can get it, it's no problem," you answer, surprised to see such a young kid working.

"Pa for me too," he insists real assertive-like. "It ain't no extra," he says to put you at ease.

You look over at Tina and shrug. She shrugs back. What the hell, you think and jump out of big Alice-II to stretch your legs for a minute. Quaint little place they got here. An old black woman with silver hair sits on the sidewalk in a white antique wicker rocking chair with the paint peeling off, swaying gently back and forth. You smile and nod hello at her, but she doesn't take any notice. An old hound dog lies beside her, snappin' away at flies buzzin' about its head. Yuck. And you'll be damned if they don't have an old-fashioned Coke machine, the kind with bottles. It's been way too long. A soda pop don't sound bad at all. What they got? Coke, Dr Pepper, Sprite, root beer. Oh yeah. You fish around in your jeans' pockets for change and just as you dig out a few quarters and dimes a big, sweaty black man in a dirty T-shirt walks up and puts change in, gettin' in your way. Sheesh! What a rude dude! He could've waited.

"It's on the house," he says with a faint smile and starts to walk off.

"Huh? What fer? I got change."

"'Cause I said so," he answers just like the kid. Obviously the father.

"What anarnation's got into ever'body today?" you smile and shake your head. He smiles back and walks back in the store. When he's out of view you plug some more change in the machine, get Tina a root beer too, and pop the lids off.

'The sky will be black,' the old woman croaks, her eyes not moving, just staring straight ahead. Poor old lady.

'Now probably not for another nine or ten hours or so,' you reply as best you can to such an outlandish statement.

'No, the sky will not be black with night or the stars. It will be black with our bones,' she seems to be preaching to an invisible congregation of lost souls. Poor old lady's just lonely and afraid of dying. Hell, you can't blame her. It's sad though. It makes you remember back to how your grandma was before she passed away.

'Why did the chicken cross the playground?' you ask.

'Why?' she asks with a serious tone of voice, as if you were about to reveal the ultimate answer to all the great mysteries of life, the universe, and everything.

'To get to the other *slide*,' you grin.

No reaction. Sheesh! Lost cause. Oh well, you tried.

Tina walks up as you're chugging the root beer.

'Hmmm hmmm' you offer her one.

'Mmm thanks hon.' She eagerly takes the other off your hands and then does as you do—gulp, gulp, gulp, gulp—she rolls the cold bottle across her forehead, looking awfully pretty in her tight T-shirt. So you give her a big, juicy kiss and walk with her back to the truck, hand in hand.

'Boy, these're nice people,' you say, 'that man bought my soda-pop for me. Don't know why.'

'Cause truckers buy a lot of gas, silly. He wants you comin' back.'

'Yah, I guess you're right.'

'Hey, mistah, you a football player?' the kid asks while he mans the gas pump.

Me? Nope. I tried out for it back in high school about a million billion years ago. I sprained my ankle real bad in practice and ain't tried since. It ain't for me. I used to lift weights some, but that's about it. How about you? You gonna be a football player?

'Heck yah, I'm gonna score a million touchdowns! Guess how old I am.'

'Hmmm. I don't know. Whatchoo think, hon, how old is he?'

'Mmm. I'd say thirteen.' Tina guesses a bit high, knowin' what he wants to hear.

'I guess twelve. Who's right?'

'Neither! I'm nine!' he says proud as can be.

'Only nine? And that big?' Shoot, then, you just might score a million touchdowns. Who's your favorite team?'

'I like the Steelers best. They're gonna win the Super Bowl this year, you watch. My name's Samuel, by the way. You're Bubba, ain't choo?'

'Wha? Yah. How'd you know?' you ask with your mouth hanging open.

'Oh, I just know.'

The gas shuts off and he puts the hose away and the gas cap back on like he was born knowing how, and he runs back up to the store.

'Damn weirdest thing I ever did see,' you tel. Tina. 'You know that kid or his Pa?'

'I may've seen 'em before, but I don't remember. He probably just heard me call you Bubba.'

'Yah, I guess so. I'll go pay for this so we can hit the road.'

The bell on the screen door rings as you enter. 'It's on the house,' the man insists with his arms folded across his chest, standing behind an old antique hand-operated cash register like he won't take no for an answer.



'What on earth's goin' on here?'

'You Bubba, right?'

'Yah, but so what, ever body named Bubba get free gas here?'

'Nope, just those that save my uncle's life,' he says with a smile and reaches his hand out to shake. You oblige with a firm handshake and the muscles bulge out in both your arms. Not many people can take handshakes like that without serious injury. There's an unspoken language in handshakes that tells the both of you, you've found a new friend.

'Now how in the heck did you find out?' you have to ask.

'We have our ways,' he grins, meaning he knows someone who was there at the bar last night.

'I just thank God I was right. It's entirely possible I might not have been. I just hate hearin' about nasty stuff like that. Well, look, it was really nothin'. I was glad to do it, just to put that racist SOB Ray in his place. You don't owe me nothin'.

"How 'bout we just say it's for my own peace of mind, if that's okay with you."

You heave a sigh. "Alright, alright, but this is the last time I get free gas. Deal?"

'Deal. Long as you come back.'

'Course I will, but let me buy just one thing.'

'Well, I don't know,' he teases you and chuckles. 'Sure, take your time, look around, maybe somethin' for the little lady.'

'Maybe. Say, I don't think I caught yer name.'

"Oh, sorry 'bout that. You can call me Moses or Moe. People who call me Moses think I'm gonna part water and people who call me Moe think I'm gonna throw a pie in their face."

"Heh, heh, heh, heh. I guess I'll call you Moses then."

'Well, look around, I gotta keep the books in order.' He flips beads on an abacus as he goes down a row of reception traps.

Besides the typical junk food that all gas stations have, the place is filled with various antiques and bric-a-brac. There's a bunch of pretty vases and trunks, also an old mahogany rocking chair, three pedal-operated sewing machines. Your grandma had one similar. It's too much to resist and you give the pedal a push.

"Those still work," Moses hollers across the store.

'I don't think it'll fit on the truck,' you reply. He goes back to flipping beads on the Chinese abacus.

There's also a locked glass china cabinet with fancy dishes and silverware inside. Real silver, that is, not the plated stuff. Well, you don't have the time or the money to be dealing with any of this right now. Then something catches your eye, several bouquets of dried wild flowers hanging from a string. They've been perfumed. Tina would sure love one of those. Why not? Hmm. What the heck, only five bucks, let's get two.

'Yep, I was guessin' right, somethin' for the lady. That'll be ten even. Uh oh, what's this? Why you gettin' two? You ain't got two girlfriends, do you?' he asks and punches numbers on the register, giving you a quizzical look.

'Heh, heh, nope. That one girl in the truck is all the woman I can handle.'

'Ha ha ha ha. Why two then?'

'You see.' You dig out your wallet and hand him ten bucks. He eyes you even more suspiciously now.

'My daughter made those just last week before she left for math camp.'

"Math camp?"

'Yah, that's what I said. But who knows, maybe someday she'll get a college degree and

make us proud. and lots of money." He puts the ten dollars in the register.

"Ah-ha, so there's a method to the madness. Think maybe she'll be a doctor?"

"Probably a physicist. She's awfully smart, just like her mama. Lily. Lily went into town, be back in a little while. Why don't you bring the lady in and sit for awhile."

"Well, I'd love to, but I'm really pressed for time. I've got a load of computers I have to pick up this afternoon but I'm gonna take Tina out first. I'm thinkin' I'll propose to her. We've talked it over a bit. I'm sure she'll say yes. Check out this ring."

"Man. That's one fancy piece of ice. What'd you pay for it?"

"It's been in the family. It was grandma's and dad left it to me in his will. The band's new, though. Well, I gotta get. Tell that football player to score a touchdown for me."

"Well, hang on a sec. Samuel!" he yells for his boy. "He's cleanin' up the back room. I coach the jr. high team. He's a year ahead in school so next year he'll be able to play. You oughta see that boy run. He's better than most of the kids three and four years older."

"Yah, pa?" Samuel asks as he empties a dustpan in the trash.

"Say goodbye to Bubba here."

"Leavin' already? You take care, mistah. And come back soon."

"You bet I will. This's a nice little place you got here."

"Good. I'm glad to hear that. Business's gettin' real slow these days. There's too many big corporate stations openin' down the road." Moses points out the window and sure enough there's a Citigo sign takin' up half the sky, just a half-mile down the highway.

"That stinks. Well, I'll tell people to stop in."

"That'd be great."

"Well, I gotta hit the road. Busy day ahead. Got that computer equipment to haul. Big job. Can't be late."

"Alright, I'll see ya around then."

"You bet."

"Me too!" Samuel says.

"Absolutely."

So you shake hands again and exchange. Nice meetin' you's and also shake hands with Samuel. Strong kid. He just might make it to the pros someday. You think that maybe when you and Tina get that farmhouse you'll stop back by to get some of this old furniture. That's a ways in the future though. So you take one of the bouquets of wild flowers and give it to the old lady outside. She looks at it and, for the first time in forever, seems to be looking at this world and not some far off mystery place. She makes the biggest smile you think you've ever seen and her eyes sparkle a sparkle that's probably rare for her these days. You scratch the old hound dog on its head and he licks your hand.

"Come on, Bubba. We ain't got all day!" Tina yells from the truck.

"I'm comin'. I'm comin'!"

You hand Tina her bouquet and she smiles one of her sheepish, bashful, bedroom eyes you shouldn't have smiles that make your heart skip a beat.

You drive off in the heat of the day and Moses and Samuel go outside and stand next to Moses' mother-in-law.

"He's sure a nice man, uh Pa?"

"Yah, I suppose so. Not many like him around anymore. Risks his neck to save a stranger on a hunch. And brightens an old lady's day with flowers."

The old gypsy woman smiles, holding her flowers, and says, "Yes, but he don't know what he is," then continues to vigilantly stare out into space somewhere just ahead of her.

## Words Are Cheap

In the cold coal mine mine is the mind twisted blistered blizzard of synthetic chemicals and no emotion no discretion no inhibition just the secretion of thoughts you never wanted to hear there everywhere you go you know the things I show like cigarette smoke in a crowded bar it burns your eyes and cannot be escaped the memory of your mind-soul raped If it hurts it's only because it's true these things I tell you Lies are weak truths strong and painful Can you take it? Are you ready to be an artist? To realize that nothing but nothing is holy and not even that? Let go of the things you hold sacred and anything is possible passable passable urine test Testes of steel are what takes Take that and that and that and that and take some more oh holy whore of the PC bible

Anything is possible with no limitations of artificially sweetened taboos I once opened a can of artificially sweetened TAB oo oomed and bubbled and oozed out of the can and over my fingers TAB ooze crawled up my arm and over my body just like I did like to crawl all over yours, adies but I could not get inside my brain the impenetrable computer mistress of infinite calculations and no emotion except maybe humor

One zero one Flip flop fan Bye the bit pop the zirconium trigger called a stage and feed the rage of laughter Look deep into yourself and see the sick joke you really are be an undying star or a black hole if you'd rather gather all evil and collapse it to a core of comedy immortal immortal laughter

Have you the courage to peel back the hood of The Grim Reaper like the skin of a ripe banana? Will you slip and fall on your face when you see us? Or will you laugh like the madman you're sure to become if you survive? Remain alive pass this last and final test and join the hordes of we soulless immortals who never rest There's work to be done jokes to be made blood to be paid for painting the portrait of Death

Is his face a skin of decaying flesh rotting with worms? Scenes of war exploding bombs flying bullets Murder torture hate? No Would you like to know? Will you laugh or cry when you finally see for yourself that his face is one and the same as that of a prison have-a-nice-day smiley-face button? Will you laugh and live forever? Or will you cry and die? Laughter prolongs life we all know that Can you laugh at everything? Infinite laughter eternal life

**Long live Death!!** Death of the soul

Ever since the dawn of man the subconscious has stored in the back of the brain's darkest corners the fact that the soulless live forever That's if one could call it a life

**Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha**

What's 22 long blue and makes women scream?

Find out yourself



'Hon, we got about two hours to chill before we have to pick up that load of computers in the city.' you turn the radio down a notch so you can hear.

'Hey! I like that song. She loves you, yah, yah, yah.' she sings along with it.

'She loves me, yah, yah, yah.' you join her and the Beatles, adding your own improvisation. She laughs and keeps on singing. "Hungry?" you ask.

'Heck yah.' She about jumps out of the seat. "I thought you'd never ask."

Well, then say somethin' next time, silly. How's bout that "ol' diner that's got them blueberry pancakes you love so much?" It's more of a statement than a question, if she doesn't get her blueberry pancake fix once or twice a week she'll go into BWS (Blueberry Withdrawal Syndrome). She gives you a big wet kiss on the cheek for an answer and snuggles your arm, givin' both you and Bob (your dragon tattoo) boners.

The church parking lot that rents out parking spaces is pretty quiet this time of year, what with the college kids away for school break, which is good. The attendant's not even in his booth, which's better 'til I save you two fifty (you big spender, you). Hell, it would've been five if you was pullin' a trailer. He'll probably be there when you get back and he'll ask for his two fifty then. Everybody wants money. Money, money, money, money. Even God wants money. Can you blame him?

So you park the truck toward the back of the parking lot where there's some shade trees and a few other semi-trucks—truckers love a good diner. You switch on Alice II off, lock her up, and jump down. Tina climbs out and you walk to the diner, your arm round her shoulder, her hand in your back pocket. On the way you both stop and laugh at the ridiculously expensive clothes in a store window. Fifty for an ugly khaki shirt, eighty for a pair of designer jeans, etc. God, rich people are so stupid. Especially college kids.

"Ooo! I know!" Tina squeals. "Let's go in and try on some of these nice clothes. Jus' for fun. C'mon!" She grins devilishly.

'Are you serious?' you ask dumbfounded and pull back, jokingly getting a tight grip on your wallet, just in case she's, but knowing she isn't.

No. "Ha ha ha ha!"

'Heh heh heh. You devil.' <Smooootch>

A couple of snooty salespeople give you angry stares from behind the windows as they see you making fun of their fine apparel for a class of people above lowly scum like you. Weenies. So you and Tina walk on. Tina turns and sticks her tongue out at them. Heh, heh.

So you cross the street and walk by some cheesy artsy fartsy café with a couple of neohippie wannabes, a few high school kids in all black and weird clown-like makeup, some chess playin' eggheads, three flaming homosexuals, and some older guys in suits walkin' on the sidewalk all hangin' out under a roofed patio. What a life. Makes you glad you never went to college.

A gang of young leather-wearing weirdoes hangs out by a street corner listening to some awful noise blast through the open window of their car. *If consequences dictate my course of action, and it doesn't matter what's right, it's only wrong if you get caught.*

"Boy, what a positive message," you whisper to Tina.

The rusty spring mechanism on the diner's screen door sings a friendly greeting as you and Tina stroll in and the smell of a hundred breakfasts makes your mouths water. The cook, Tom, pours oil, flips omelets, hash-browns, and adds all the fixins in time to country music pouring out of a boom box on a shelf next to the grill behind the order window.

'Easy Money. What's Happenin'?' Ol' Crazy John sits at the counter yells and everybody looks up to see just who it could be comin' in. He calls everyone Easy Money.

'That's a big fat fib if I ever heard one!' Money's never easy.' you laugh and tip his baseball cap backwards as he pokes you in the belly.

"I thought I smelled trouble." Tom the cook says and glances up, nodding hello, not missing a beat with the food or the music.

All the guys sittin' at the counter start sayin' 'What's up? How ya been? How's life?' etc., etc. Tina nods hello, and a half dozen dirty baseball caps and a couple of cowboy hats tip a 'Howdy do, ma'am' to her. So everyone trades fishing stories, and truck stories, and talkin' about soccer and basketball, and baseball, and billiards and bowling, and paleontology and on and on. Round things go on forever. Half of 'em smoke cheap cigarettes and wash down their big eggs 'n' bacon breakfast special with gallons of coffee. Tina grabs a booth by the window as an elderly couple gets up. She quickly cleans up their mess, stacks the dishes for the waitress, and starts talkin' with a couple of the trucker's wives, talkin' cow, i.e. gossipin' Women. Bless 'em.

So you rap up the rap session with the guys and go sit with Tina, carryin' the funnies section of the paper that you mooned off of Ron. The girls Tina was talkin' to get up and go back to their booth to give you a bit of privacy.

"Order yet, hon?" you ask.

"Nope, was waitin' for you."

There're two waitresses runnin' helter skelter to keep everybody stuffed with grease and coffee. Hillary, the cute one, comes over with water and menus then cleans the table.

"Hey Bubba, How's it goin'?" she asks with a cute little smile.

"Not too bad, Hillary. How you been?" She's always been kind of fond of you, but she's a bit too young, even if it weren't for Tina.

"Ex-sting. School's goin' okay. Pretty boring though. Here's your menus."

"I know what I want," you and Tina chorus and then laugh. Hillary smiles, takes back the menus, and snatches her order-form from her apron pocket.

"I'll have..." you and Tina say at the same time again and give each other a look of tired helplessness. Then you get an idea.

"The lady will have the blueberry pancakes," you order in a James Bond rip-off voice, wishing you had a tux to complete the image. "and...orange juice?" you give Tina a questioning look. She nods. "Yes, Chateau Orange Jeux, ninety six." Everyone in earshot laughs at your goofiness. And then, you switch back to your normal voice. "ham, fried eggs, over easy, wheat toast, double order o' hash browns, and coffee."

"Hold on." Tina stops the press. "You better get decaf if you want coffee or you'll be bouncin' off the walls, makin' a total jackass outta yerself. I know you."

"Aw, hon, just one cup. I'll be good. Promise." You give her that sad puppy dog look she can't resist.

"Hell's bells, a right, a right. But if you give him coffee," she tells Hillary. "I'm not gonna responsible for any damage to the restaurant...assuming there'll be a restaurant left, that is."

"Well, that's all good, I can use a vacation." Hillary says loudly so her boss'll hear.

"Yah, yah," you can't let them out scy you, "but if we don't hurry up and get those pancakes, Tina'll turn into the fanged blueberry beast-fiend from the Pits of Hell and tear the whole town apart lookin' for every blueberry there is. No lie, I've seen her do it."

Hillary obviously gettin' mildly annoyed with all these juvenile antics, repeats everything to double-check the order and says, "I'll be right back with your Orange Jeux and coffee," she gives your pony tail a flip. "Mr. Bond."

Tina stares at her all jealous-like as she walks away wagging her cute little twenty-year-old butt back and forth like it was a sign sayin' OPEN FOR BUSINESS. You grab Tina's hand across the table, kiss it, and stare in her eyes. She looks down all bashful, almost blushing. She kisses your hand too.

"Are you sure you want ham and eggs? You were doin' so good with the veggie diet you're gettin' trimmer, I can tell."

"Well, I figure one little re-apse won't turn me into Santa Claus. Ho! Ho! Ho!"

"Okay, okay. I gave up, you're incorrigible."

"Here ya go," Hilary interrupts, setting the coffee and juice down. "OH! I'm sorry." A bit of juice sloshes out of the glass onto the table, and a little bit gets on Tina's jeans. Hilary wipes off the table.

"Oh, that's okay," Tina mumbles in a terse falsetto voice. "I'll just step in the bathroom and towel it off. Accidents happen."

When Tina walks away Hilary says, "Gosh, I really didn't mean to."

"She'll live. Somethin's eatin' at her lately. It ain't your fault," you explain.

"I'll fix this juice back up," she says and does.

Tina props back down, still in a funk, and grabs your hand again. "I kinda wish we didn't come here today."

"Come on now, hon. It's just a little spilled juice. It's just an honest little accident. You're not even all that wet, just a little spot on your leg. It could'a been the whole darn glass and then it would'a looked like you wet yourself. Heh, heh." You snicker and nudge her with your foot to get her to ease up a bit.

"Yah, I guess yer right." She rolls her eyes and maybe feels a little silly for makin' a big deal out of nothin', which she should.

Okay, so that's all cleared up. Hmm... sugar cream stir. Kiss Tina's hand for the thousandth time this month. Coffee. "<Sluuurrrpp> Ow. Hot. Little too sweet. Oh well."

"Here, silly, put some ice in it," Tina offers and spoons a couple of small chunks of ice into your cup from her water glass.

"Thanks, babe." <Sluuuurrpp. Gulp, gulp> Strange... seems like a million hazillion years since you've tasted anything like this. But damn, if it's not like...fe itself. Really weird; you've had coffee plenty of times before. Right? Of course! Oh well, you're just gettin' senile. Your synapses start to fire a symphony of cascading fireballs behind your eyes, crashing with tempos from the farthest reaches of space. "<Gulp, gulp> You look over at Tina and think how could you limit yourself when so many possibilities lie on the horizon. Jesus. How the hell could you think some shit like that?" This is the girl you're gonna marry, for Christ's sake. "<GULP>" you finish it off. "Hey, you better go easy on that," Tina softly warns.

"I'm fine," you snap at her.

"Sorry, Jeez, just lookin' out for my baby," she consoles.

"Bah. Coffee makes me feel a million years younger."

A few "Amen, brother!"s and "You said it!"s rise up from the counter where rednecks and truckers down pots of the hot back fuel like little automated machines stuck in an endless loop.

"Hell, baby, I feel so young all of a sudden I could just run off and go to college."

"Yah, right," Tina snaps back. "I know you, you'd get bored of college in one week. Besides, what about that farm you want a start with me? Remember?"

"Oh yah, I forgot. Heh, heh. Just kidding," you wink.

"Refill?" Hilary asks, seeming to get a big kick out of all this.

"Sure. Why not?" Say, you're a college girl, what'd ya think—would I do okay in college?

"I don't see why not. As big as you are, they'll probab'y try to get you on the football team," she teases, knowing you're way too old. But then...

"Damn it all! Everybody says that to me. Maybe I will. I'll just get in college, join the football team, and then I'll be a star quarterback and have hundred young college girls always



chasin' me around. You put your arm around Hillary's waist and pull her in close. She's kind of taken aback by your sudden abrupt manner, even if you are just 'oking around. Or are you? Tina scowls at you from across the table with her arms folded. Hell, no big deal. If she's jealous then that just means you'll get an extra good bang for the buck tonight!

Then a tiny, a most indiscernible drop of moisture forms in her right eye. Something about it pierces you to your deepest core, cutting through the cheap caffeine buzz. You take your hand off Hillary's waist. Uh, Hillary, maybe you better take the coffee away. I'll just stick with water.

Sure. No prob. I think your order's about ready anyway.

Hon, you know I'm kiddin'. We've got plans and I'm stickin' to 'em.

It's not that. It's just that... well... when you drink coffee you scare me. I know it's crazy and you'd never hurt a fly, but... you know how sensitive I get to aggression. It's all from growin' up with that psycho family of mine. Smartest thing I ever did was run away. But it's just... when you drink coffee you remind me of all that. I'm sorry. I should've said...

No, hon, you're right, coffee don't mean a thing to me compared to you. I promise. No, I pinky swear. I will never drink coffee again. You lock pinkies with her and she smiles. Then damn it all, if Hillary doesn't bend over to pick up a napkin, puttin' on one helluva show. Of course you glance out the corner of your eye and Tina notices.

"Do you think she's prettier than me?" she accuses.

Well... I... shit... you try to think fast, then tone your voice down so no one hears. "Look, I'm not gonna lie to you, she *is* prettier than you. For Christ's sake, she's probably only twenty years old. But damnit, I love you. You're the only girl I love. Shit, I was just playin' around. I wish you weren't so jealous all the time. Look, I was wantin' to save this for a more romantic setting, but what the hell, we've talked about it a lot and my mind's made up." Her eyes get wide 'cause she knows what's comin'. Knows what you're gonna ask anyway, though she's not expectin' the ring so soon. And especially not such a big rock. You pull it out, open the case up, and whisper "I always love you. Will you marry me and stay with me always?"

She looks at the ring, wide-eyed and slack-jawed. Then at you. Then at the ring. Then.

"Yes!.. YES!! YES!! I'll marry you!!" She lumps over the table, springing the juice again, kissing you over and over with tears in her eyes. "I'll stay with you always. I love you, you big crazy goof-ball." < Smoooootch. Smoooootch. Smoooootch. >

You almost don't hear all the clapping in the little diner as you hold her face in your hands and look in her eyes. You're surprised to find your vision a little hazy through some unfamiliar drops forming in your eyes. What the hell is it? You wipe one away with your left fingertip and look at it like you've never imagined such a thing could happen to you. Then you look at her and back at it... and at her.

Hon, you say.

Yah, Bubba, what's it?"

I don't think I've ever really been happy till now." There's a lot of Awwws in the restaurant. Sheesh. Can't people mind their own damn bee's wax? She kisses you again for what seems like forever. Damn, it's good too. Ain't nothin' sweeter. A few of the boys and some of their girlfriends and wives and even kids come over to congratulate you and Tina. All the girls ogle the ring, and now it's their turn to be a little jealous. Wah, wah. Hillary congratulates you and Tina too, which makes you glad, and clears up the spilled juice again. Besides which, she's brought your food with her. And another vice. On the house.

So when everyone finally leaves you alone (thanks to Crazy John, who chased everyone off) you dig in, startin' with the hash browns and Tina dives into her blueberry pancakes the size of a trampoline. Out the window you see some poor kid dressed really weird, all in black leather



and chains on a hot day. And filthy as hell. You feel like asking somebody to take some food out to him. It looks like he hasn't had a decent meal in weeks. Probably all strung out on drugs. He's just out of Tina's view and you don't want her to see, she'd get all depressed. You're just about to see if John can't whip up a quick 'to go' breakfast for the boy, but then the kid walks off. Oh well. There's got to be a homeless shelter he can go to if he gets really starvin'. Good thing about livin' out in the boonies on a farm, at least you'll be able to raise your kids right. None of this psycho city bullshit that even small towns have nowadays to some degree.

"Hey, Tom! These pancakes are great! Babe." Tina says and brings your mind back to Earth. "you want a bite of my pancakes?" She enticingly waves a chunk on the end of her fork like a magic wand.

"Nah. I got more than enough right here. I was just thinkin'."

"Hmm?" she chews.

"I'm really glad we'll be raisin' a family in the country away from all this city crap that screws up kids these days." A couple of waiters at the counter raise their coffees in agreement.

"Mmm hmmm!" "You should try it!" she agrees through a smiling mouthful of her blue polka-dotted ecstasy, washing it down with the coffee. At the mention of kids she brightens up even more. You lean over, kiss her, and taste the blueberries, making you wish you'd ordered the same.

You laugh and slice up some of the ham, dipping it in the yellow egg yolk, stabbing away at it with a fork to make a mini egg/ham shish kabob. Then you see a damn cockroach scoot by on the floor. You feel like grabbing it and throwin' it out the door. But no, you've been actin' way too much the clown today. To hell with it, someone's probably kill it. Oh well, this is no time for you to play savior to an ungrateful insect. Tina hates it when you do that. So instead you grab the fork and right as you lift it up to your mouth and munch down Tina gets the weirdest look on her face as she stares past you. It's that "Oh shit" look as if Satan himself just walked in the door wearing fire-proof slacks, a white shirt and tie, shooting flames out every orifice of his body (yes, even that one), saying he just joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and was wondering if you've been saved. You just about turn around to see what on earth that is. However as you chomp down on the ham and eggs, you can't help but think, "This stuff tastes like sin."

Rip  
Stream

I need  
Crying  
Screaming  
in King

up  
Don't  
There

Only  
No

Talk <sup>want</sup>  
Keep  
Aren't

Keep  
Don't

Laugh  
Smile

Live

Powerfully

Die

Everything

Sharpen

Keep

Preparing

a hole in your bath water.  
into it the first thought that  
rips it. the carn on your foot (big  
Dick Tru. y paper wall.  
just like a whole.

So more  
into the bath  
to the soap  
a rope

bend over, Ben Dover.  
are no baths in prison.  
showers

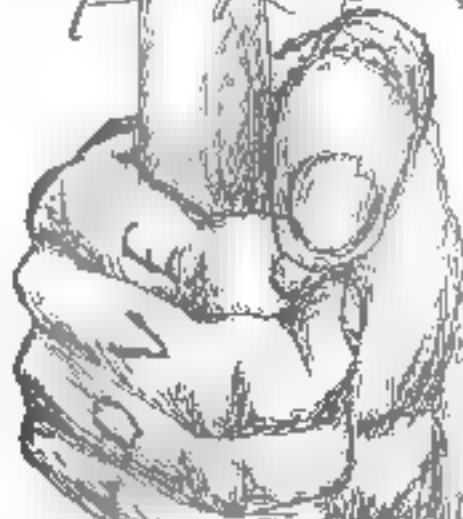
one to talk to  
soap is life and the soap dies when you talk to it.  
<sup>talk to it</sup>  
your mouth shut and you want go to the hole.

They want go to your hole  
the gate of the psychos its your only protection  
ever let them know you're human  
when you should cry  
when you're serious.  
when you should die  
talk dangerous  
Things

your teeth  
daddy weapons used at hand.  
for the final stand

F R E E D O M

= DEATH!



DAVID  
8/2/70

The streets in front of the university are jammed up by police cars and a piercing siren slowly dies out like a cat being stretched on a rack as an ambulance pulls up and stops. It's too late to do any good, of course, but the bodies have to be taken away somehow. As usual, a group of gawkers stands by gawking.

Rookie cops are hanging out, getting pointers for one day when they might have to do detective work. Not much to be done here, though—pretty much an open/shut case. So some of the rookies head over to the nearby bagel shop to get out of the way and a coffee. It's a bright early summer day, so two of them opt to stand outside on the sidewalk for fresh air and conversation.

"Hey hey, Josh. Good to see you back in service. How're the wife and baby?" Asks one rookie cop to another and gives him a light punch in the arm.

"Both're beautiful and healthy," says the second rookie cop, play boxing with the first, then digs out his wallet. "Here's a picture of all three of us at the hospital, right after Jessica Anne was born. I can't believe the lieutenant gave me a week off. Must be gettin' soft in his old age. So, Brian, when's yours due?"

"Another two-and-a-half months. God, I'm anxious. Quitting the military police was the best thing I ever did, if I hadn't I never would've met Susan. Say, whatcha think, David Michael Phillips, sound like a good name?"

Sounds great to me. Hey, you won't believe this—some jerks at the hospital named their baby Beavis.

"Oh God! Ha ha ha. Oh, that's insane. You're kidding, right?"

"No, afraid not."

"Man, those parents ought to be..."

"<Skrrr beep> Unit sixteen, minor auto collision at Twelfth and University needs assistance <beep>," the dispatcher interrupts.

"<beep> Unit sixteen here. On my way <beep>," Officer Brian Phillips says into his radio.

"Oh well, Brian, it's not like you'll be missing much here," says Officer Joshua Roberts.

"Yeah, I know, but the sarge wanted me to see this murder scene get cleaned up, to maybe get a few pointers for when I try out for detective. But that's years away."

"You can have it. Me, I'm just doin' this to pay the bills."

"So why did you become a cop, then, Josh?"

"Well, dad was a cop, so it seemed like an easy thing to get into. It was. But hard to get out of. What I really want to be is an architect. I designed that house I'm having built for the wife and baby."

And built for you too, don't forget."

"Shit! Are you kiddin'? When will I ever get time to go home?"

"Ha ha ha ha..."

"Ha ha ha ha..."

"So how about you, Brian, any big hopes or dreams?"

"Well, if I had the time or money I'd open a microbrewery. All that time in the military police in Germany turned me into a beer fiend. If it's good beer. Nowadays I limit myself to just one on weekdays, four on Saturday. As far as I'm concerned it's the best damn thing in the world."

"Oh, come on! How long does a stinkin' beer last? A few minutes. Look at the university's old buildings—the old Victorian styles of that one over there, and the old Greek columns on that one. Now that's amazing."

"Hell, that's pussy shit. Boy, don't you know you ain't a real man 'less yer true love is beer?"

"Ha ha ha ha."

"Ha ha ha ha."

"No sir, Brian, the only true love I got is my family."

"Yeah, man, you said it. I can't wait til David Michael's born. Yeah, my mind's made up, that's what I'll call him."

"If your wife agrees."

"Ha ha ha ha."

"Ha ha ha ha."

"Hey! What the hell do you two think you're doin'?" yells Sergeant Alders.

"Sorry, Sarge," Officer Phillips speaks up, "we were just talking about our families. Josh, show him the picture."

Officer Roberts hesitantly digs out his wallet.

"I've seen the damn thing a hundred times already. He is my partner, y'know. Don't you two have any better sense than to hold on a minute. Afternoon, ma'am. Any better sense than to sit around laughin' right next to a murder scene?" For crying out loud, what're you trying to make us look like? And didn't I just hear you get called out over the radio, Officer Phillips?"

"Sorry, Sarge. I was just on my way."

"Sorry's not good enough. I know fender benders aren't quite as exciting as what you did in the military police, but you've got a job to do—do it!"

"On my way, Sergeant."

"Wait a sec, Sarge," Officer Roberts cuts in. "Brian wants to make detective, and there is a murder scene right there. Let me take care of the accident, and I'll be right back. Okay?"

"Alright, alright, go. Somebody go before the people die of old age waitin' for a cop to show up."

Officer Phillips and Sergeant Alders walk back toward the murder scene and Officer Phillips asks questions and takes notes. "So, Sarge, this sn't a robbery?"

"No. I wish it was that simple. Kid went psycho and shot a man. Just turned seventeen years old two weeks ago. He shot the victim point blank in the back of the head with his dad's pistol. The guy didn't even see it coming. We've got the father in custody for involuntary manslaughter; the man's nothing but a drunk bum."

"Jesus, that's cheerful. So why did the kid kill this guy?"

"Who knows? That's why we're cops—to find out. All we know is that the kid's girlfriend was raped a couple of weeks ago, on the kid's birthday, of all things."

"Yeah, Lieutenant Fung briefed us on that case. So who did he kill?"

"That's what's so damn weird about this, victim's driver's license, insurance, and registration all just say Bubba, no last name. And his truck driver's license doesn't even check out over the computer. Best fake I've ever seen. Anyway, the kid killed this Bubba guy, then Bubba's girlfriend Tina Dome killed the kid. Shoved a pen through his right eye and into his brain. Waitress threw hot coffee on the kid at the same time."

"Hey, Sarge, you think this Bubba might've been the one who raped the kid's girl?"

"Maybe, but Bubba's girl says they were out of the state when it happened. We'll question her some more when she calms down. Turns out, she used to deal acid back in the mid-eighties. I don't think it has anything to do with this, though."

"Kid's name?"

"Padraic Peaches Crowley."

## Final Poem

The sharp beak broke through the hard sturdy shell and the baby bird pulled his way out. He dried his wet feathers in the incubator's light and begged for food and answers while the harsh glow shined into his eyes.

"Oh, no, I am not you mother," said the bird's keeper, reminiscent of a child's book. "I found you alone in the woods and brought you home with me."

"Then what am I?" cheeped the baby bird.

"You are a raven."

And so the baby raven was raised and trained in the ways of behaving 'ravenly.' His tongue was split so that he could go to school where he learned to say "Nevermore" and other choice words with which he could torment grief-stricken poets.

He learned to scratch at windowsills until allowed entrance into a room. He learned to fly and perch atop the bust of Pallas, as should all black-feathered reminders of death and tragedy. A sharp beak, spouting sharper words, sharper and colder than razors, cutting more precisely than lasers. All evil condensed and focused to a penetrating pinpoint, emanating from eyes darker than black holes, almost as dark as the thoughts within.

At graduation, he was given a sturdy Kevlar breastplate. Nothing could harm raven. He was taught and learned his lessons well.

However, raven grew weary, and questioned what his unending song meant. He asked everywhere in birdland. He asked the owl, who said it was all nonsense and to get back to work. He asked the eagle, but the eagle tried to attack. He asked the ostrich, who hid her head in the sand. He asked the penguin, who paid close attention, clapped his wings in applause, and slid into the water to catch a fish. A moment later the penguin hopped back out again, gulped down his fish, and said, "I'm sorry, what did you just ask?" Raven then asked the crane what is the meaning of this song "Nevermore" that he had been trained to sing. Crane simply said that he was too well balanced to hear such things. Raven tried to talk to the songbirds, but they were afraid of him and flew away very quickly.

Raven had almost given up hope when a lone dove came and gently perched beside him. He sat very still so she would not fly away. Then slowly he asked her, "Dove, what does my song mean?" She said nothing, only held up a mirror for the raven to look into. His deadly laser voice and glare were reflected back and burned a hole in his Kevlar vest. His heart was punctured by his own weapons and as the lasers went out of his dark, keen eyes, his vision was no longer obscured and clouded. He saw that his feathers were not black. And as his heart pumped its last ounce of bloody humors and as he breathed his last icy breath, he stared into that mirror. He stared and he smiled. All these lonely years he had been lied to. For in the mirror was no raven; he saw that he too was a dove.

Where the raven had died a dove was born, a dove with bright eyes and warm breath. And the dove had no questions or songs of 'Nevermore.' He was simply happy. And free at last.



"Oh, my!" Shauna squeaks. "What are all those cops doing across the street?"

"Whoa! Check it out, man, they're carryin' out a body!" Jeff excitedly tells everyone. Everyone who cares, that is.

"God, what now?" you say and stand up, glancing out the graduate student office window. Wonderful. Someone died. Big deal. We all do eventually. Don't we? Oh, of course we do, man, quit being stoo... stupid. Hopefully you'll die better than that, however. Jeez, what a shitty way to die—in some crappy little dung-hole sleazy diner. Christ, every time you walk by the place a dozen cockroaches scurry out the door—probably didn't like the food (ha ha). The poor fool the medics are carrying out probably died instantly from some weird type of food poisoning. Too bad, so sad. No. Wait a minute... There's a lot of blood splattered about. Wow. He must have been killed. Oh well. At least you have better sense and taste than to go in such sleazy establishments—it could have been you that was killed. Why the hell would anybody eat at that place? Even as cheap as most of the college students are, they still won't eat there. The smell emanating from that God-awful grease-hole draws nothing but flies, cockroaches, lunatics, and lowlifes. Cheap cigarette smoke and plumes of steam from rancid bacon and eggs frying in week-old grill oil waft out of the diner every time one of the undesirable patrons opens the door. Shit, you wish someone would close that stupid place down. It's nothing but a fucking eyesore in an old town like this, like a big ugly zit on the nose of a supermodel. Someone ought to pop it. The school would look a hundred times better if that place wasn't there across the street. It would be great if a real business opened up there—maybe a restaurant that's a little more befitting to a university town.

And why the fuck do they need so many Goddamn cops just to clean up one fucking murder? Two cops in front of the bagel shop two doors down seem to be getting a big laugh out of the situation, punching each other in the arm, horsing around like high school boys with overactive hormone glands. At least their commanding officer has the decency to make them stop. You almost feel sorry for the cops, they've probably seen so much shit like this that now they don't even care. But then it is their job. And, Christ, there are a million of the dumb sons of bitches just standing around with their thumbs up their butts, watching the blood get cleaned up by the forensics team and trying to look important in front of the news crew vultures. Doing a piss-poor job of it, too. There're about ten cop cars in the street, blocking up traffic, their lights making the whole street look like a disco floor. All it needs is some cheesy seventies music and you'd have a party. Except there's one person who won't be dancing again, already stuffed into a huge body bag. Must've been a big SOB. Dumb-ass pigs, they could have used parking spots—that is what they're there for. God, it sucks living in a society ruled by a bureaucracy. And the bigger the bureaucracy the more of its available resources get wasted (like police power and parking spaces). But then that's how bureaucracies stay in control—consume, consume, consume. Cigarettes, gasoline, television, junk food, cosmetics, perfume, automobiles... eat, eat, eat, eat, eat, eat, eat. How much longer until the 'food' runs out? Or until the 'harvesting' ruins the world? Who cares? You don't, that's for sure. Christ, man, you're a fucking chemist—you depend on the idiots so you can be supported. There is no better way to control the ignorant masses than make them think they need whatever garbage it is you sell to them. You suppose controlling the idiots is the only thing you have in common with cops... well, that and coffee.

Oh yeah, that reminds you... you need to go check up on your research project. Of course not your real one, studying polymer electrolyte materials for rechargeable batteries, but the research you do out of love: Growing your mutant coffee plant.

## Fury Fry

Wet towel testicle snap obnoxious.  
Fist lip pound blood sweet delicious.  
Feet rib stomp wind gone.  
Locker room bathroom john.  
Caught, captured, cornered, hatred's pawn.  
Forever cycle five days a week.  
Future's outlook turning dying bleak.  
Faces crowd, anger, pain.... "All in fun."  
Too many, outnumbered, seething, threshold increasing.  
Laughter, smiles, jokes... "All in fun."  
Soul bruise eternal black never-ending never ceasing.  
Five days a week, torture endure hell.  
"Oh, what happened to your face?" ..... Fell.  
Weekend TV escape.  
The mind soul rape.  
Cathode tube ray phosphoresce, eye burn, brain engrave.  
Bugs, my Saturday Savior, how do I do it? Show me!  
Yes, I see it all so clearly now.  
Fire stick bright luminescence, I'll learn, it will save.  
Power alternates behavior, nothing to it. "Know me?"  
No, you cannot even imagine how.  
One too many futile insults.  
"Did it do any physical results?"  
An eye gouged out, a broken neck, many a rape.  
It's not my fault, they pushed me over the edge—they really did.  
Camel dromedary back snap, back lash.  
A house burned down, two unable to escape.  
The molten flame salt, it rushed me over the edge—it really did.  
Damn hell-home where he pack crap, rack cash.  
The red glow on the trees. The smell of burned flesh.  
The barely audible screams through the fire's roar, rather pretty.....  
...like..... a chime.  
"A chime?" ..... Yes..... Time to get up and do it again.  
Silent revenge.  
Silence is golden.  
Revenge is beauty.  
Come to me, my golden flame beauty, there's work to do.



"Coffee, far sweeter than a thousand kisses." Or so says J. S. Bach in his opera *Kaffee Kantate*.....